Culture e Studi del Sociale - CuSSoc
ISSN: 2531-3975
Editors-in-Chief
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Come citare / How to cite

Stefani, C. (2025). The influence of social media algorithms on young people's perception of authority: between digital validation and institutional contestation. *Culture e Studi del Sociale*, *10*(2), 59-84.

Disponibile / Retrieved https://www.cussoc.it/journal/article/view/377

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Articolo pubblicato online / Article first published online: Dicembre/December 2025

The Influence of Social Media Algorithms on Young People's Perception of Authority: Between Digital Validation and Institutional Contestation

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the influence of social media algorithms on young people's perception of authority. The topic is highly relevant in the context of declining trust in institutions, increasing social polarization, and the growing impact of digital environments on opinion formation and civic behavior. The research sought to analyze how social media algorithms shape the visibility and validation of different forms of authority, and how these mechanisms influence young people's attitudes toward institutional and informal authority. The study was conducted on a sample of 43 young individuals aged between 16 and 24 from Abrud, Alba County, Romania, including both high school and university students, selected through purposive sampling. The research method used was the semi-structured interview, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of perceptions, experiences, and attitudes regarding authority and algorithmic influence. The findings reveal that young people exhibit selective trust toward traditional institutions, favoring forms of authority based on transparency and justification. In contrast, influencers and content creators are perceived as legitimate sources of informal authority due to their authenticity, clarity, and alignment with personal values. Social media algorithms play a crucial role in shaping perceptions and norms, facilitating both the discovery of relevant content and the formation of echo chambers.

Keywords: social media algorithms, institutional authority, informal authority

1. Introduction

In recent years, social media platforms have evolved into central arenas for youth engagement, shaping not only modes of communication but also the construction of social meaning and authority. Far from being neutral infrastructures, these platforms operate through complex algorithmic systems that curate content visibility, amplify certain narratives, and marginalize others. As such, algorithms function as silent architects of digital experience, influencing which voices are heard and which forms of authority are legitimized.

For young users, authority is no longer mediated solely through traditional institutions such as family, education, or the state. Instead, it is increasingly negotiated through digital interactions with influencers, content creators, and online communities whose legitimacy stems from algorithmically driven visibility and audience engagement. This shift marks a transition from institutional to informal authority, where credibility is measured in likes, shares, and follower counts rather than formal credentials or social roles.

The emergence of algorithmically validated authority raises critical questions for social research. It challenges conventional understandings of legitimacy, trust, and

civic engagement, and calls for new analytical frameworks capable of capturing the fluidity and fragmentation of digital power relations. Investigating how algorithms shape youth perceptions of authority is essential for understanding broader transformations in social cohesion and democratic participation in the digital age.

2. Literature review

In recent years, a growing body of research has examined the impact of digital environments on the ways in which contemporary youth perceive and relate to authority. Scholars have explored how the pervasive presence of digital media and online interactions reshapes traditional frameworks of authority, challenging established norms and fostering new forms of autonomy and resistance.

Among these, Akpinar and Fazelpour (2025) investigated how social media algorithms influence the visibility of members within epistemic communities and, implicitly, the perception of authority in digital environments. Through a computational simulation, the authors found that algorithms tend to favor already established sources, marginalizing minority or non-mainstream voices. This dynamic contributes to the distortion of credibility criteria, replacing expertise with popularity, and leads to a decline in trust in formal authority.

In the context of growing reliance on algorithmic systems within public governance, Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer (2022) critically examine the legitimacy of algorithmic decision-making and its implications for trust in formal authority. Their study identifies six major threats that such systems pose to democratic legitimacy, including opacity, bias, diminished accountability, and the erosion of human oversight. Drawing on a conceptual analysis rooted in public administration theory, the authors argue that algorithmic mediation can undermine traditional forms of institutional trust by replacing transparent, deliberative processes with automated, often inscrutable mechanisms.

To address these challenges, the authors propose a calibrated institutional response, one that balances technological efficiency with democratic values such as transparency, participation, and ethical oversight. Their conclusions emphasize the urgent need for governance frameworks that not only regulate algorithmic systems but also restore public confidence in the institutions that deploy them (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2022).

Another researcher, Swart (2021), set out to investigate how young people perceive, emotionally interpret, and interact with the algorithmic selection of news on social media platforms. The study aimed to understand not only the level of awareness young users have regarding the role of algorithms, but also how this awareness influences their trust in information sources and, implicitly, in institutional authority. The research consisted of interviews with young social media users and explored their direct experiences with the algorithms that filter their informational content. This approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the relationship between technology, perception, and informational autonomy. The study's findings indicate that although many young people are aware of the existence of algorithms, their understanding is often fragmented and accompanied by feelings of uncertainty or distrust. This ambivalence contributes to a decline in trust in formal authority, as algorithmic selection is perceived as a form of invisible control that affects access to information and the capacity for critical discernment. (Swart, 2021).

In an increasingly algorithm-mediated digital landscape, De Groot, De Haan, and Van Dijken (2023) introduced the concept of algorithmic imagination to describe a

Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc, 2025, *10*(2), pp. 59-84
ISSN: 2531-3975

form of experiential knowledge through which young people navigate social platforms, relying on interface-based cues. The study aimed to explore how this intuitive awareness influences young users' ability to assess the credibility of information, not through expertise or institutional legitimacy, but rather through criteria such as popularity and emotional appeal. The research employed a qualitative methodology, based on interviews and participatory observations, which enabled a deep understanding of how young people interact with algorithms and develop strategies to control the flow of information. The authors examined not only the level of awareness but also the reflexive and affective competencies involved in this interaction. The study's conclusions revealed that young people are not passive in the face of algorithmic systems; instead, they develop forms of algorithmic imagination that allow them to anticipate and influence how content is delivered to them. However, this mode of navigation is often guided by affective and social logics, which may lead to a decline in trust in formal authority and the reinforcement of alternative criteria for validating information. (De Groot, De Haan & Van Dijken, 2023).

Further insight is offered by Pérez-Escoda et al. (2024), who argue that social media platforms have effectively become the new gatekeepers of information for young people. Their international study demonstrates that youth increasingly rely on digital environments for news and social interaction, often bypassing traditional media and institutional sources. The algorithmic architecture of these platforms privileges content from influencers and peer networks, thereby reshaping the dynamics of trust and authority. The authors emphasize the urgent need for digital literacy education to counteract the disintermediation of formal authority and the rise of algorithmically endorsed informal figures.

A relevant study for the topic addressed in this paper is that conducted by Kingsley and Hiswah (2024), which aimed to investigate how TikTok algorithms influence the formation of beliefs and social behaviors among Generation Z. The research was theoretical in nature and relied on an interdisciplinary analysis of literature from youth psychology and media studies. The method employed was qualitative, focusing on a conceptual examination of algorithmic mechanisms and their effects on cognitive and emotional processes. The study concludes that TikTok algorithms may impact young people's cognitive autonomy by fostering polarization, emotional overexposure, and informal validation of authority through influencers.

In a broader interdisciplinary context, Costello et al. (2024) examined the relationship between algorithmic exposure and adolescent mental health. Their research highlights how algorithms that promote extreme or emotionally charged content can undermine parental authority, particularly when youth encounter online communities or influencers that contradict familial guidance. The study emphasizes that algorithmic amplification not only affects psychological well-being but also erodes traditional support structures, including parental and institutional roles.

Gamboa et al. (2025) conducted a study aimed at examining the long-term impact of algorithm-driven content consumption on youth development, with a particular focus on behavior, attention, and emotional regulation. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys and interviews with participants aged 13 to 21. The findings suggest that algorithmic exposure contributes to the formation of echo chambers, diminishes attention span, and weakens real-life social skills, ultimately influencing identity construction and perceptions of influence among young people.

Yuan et al. (2025) conducted an experimental study to examine how awareness of algorithmic processes influences individuals' attitudes toward online information browsing. Through simulated browsing tasks, the research explored the relationship between algorithmic awareness and user behavior. The findings indicate that increased awareness enhances both compliance and perceived control, shaping how users relate to digital authority and the structures that govern online content exposure.

In his article *The Right to Know Social Media Algorithms*, Haochen Sun (2023) offers a concise yet powerful argument for recognizing a legal right to access information about how social media algorithms function. He emphasizes that these algorithms are not neutral tools but influential systems that shape visibility, credibility, and authority online, especially for young users whose perceptions are increasingly formed in digital environments (Sun, 2023).

Sun proposes that this right to know should be grounded in public interest, particularly in safeguarding democratic participation, public safety, and social equality. He shows how algorithms can suppress minority voices, amplify misinformation, and reinforce biases, thereby distorting civic discourse and undermining trust in institutions (Sun, 2023).

The reviewed studies demonstrate that social media algorithms significantly shape young people's perception of authority by privileging popularity over expertise, amplifying emotionally charged content, and promoting informal validation through influencers. While youth exhibit reflexive strategies in navigating digital environments, trust in institutional authority is often undermined. However, current research does not sufficiently address the tension between digital validation and institutional contestation, nor does it explore how young people simultaneously negotiate these forms of authority.

3. Theoretical Framework: Authority in the Algorithmic Age

In the contemporary digital context, authority is no longer perceived exclusively through the prism of traditional institutions, but is dynamically negotiated through algorithms that govern visibility and social validation. To understand this transformation, it is useful to conceptually apply the theories of Max Weber and Michel Foucault, which offer complementary perspectives on legitimacy and power (Weber, 2024; Foucault, 1975).

Max Weber defines three types of legitimate authority: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal. In the digital environment, traditional authority, based on historical norms and institutions such as family, school, or state, is often challenged by young people, who perceive it as rigid and disconnected from their daily reality. In contrast, charismatic authority, defined by Weber as being legitimized by the personality and influence of the leader, takes on a new form in the online space, where influencers and content creators become authority figures through authenticity, personal style, and the ability to generate emotional engagement (Ciorogar, 2018).

Rational-legal authority, based on formal rules and procedures, is represented by state and educational institutions. However, social media algorithms can undermine this form of authority through a lack of transparency and by favoring popularity over competence. Thus, young people come to validate sources of authority not through expertise, but through algorithmic visibility (Railean, 2021).

Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc, 2025, *10*(2), pp. 59-84
ISSN: 2531-3975

From Michel Foucault's perspective, authority is not a fixed entity, but a network of power relations that manifest themselves through discourses, norms and institutional practices. Algorithms function as a digital panopticon, exercising a form of invisible surveillance that influences the behaviors and preferences of young people. This disciplinary power is not expressed through direct coercion, but through subtle norming, through content selection and the creation of seemingly natural social standards (Akpinar & Fazelpour, 2024).

Moreover, algorithms exercise a form of biopolitical power, regulating digital life through profiling, prediction and personalization. They do not just observe, but proactively shape behaviors, affecting the cognitive autonomy and critical resilience of users. In this sense, algorithms become instruments for governing subjectivity, influencing what is considered legitimate, valuable, or worthy of being followed (Akpinar & Fazelpour, 2024).

Foucault emphasizes that knowledge is a form of control, and in the digital environment, what is visible and algorithmically validated becomes "truth" for users. The legitimacy of authority no longer derives from expertise or institutional position, but from the capacity to be distributed, appreciated, and reproduced in social networks. Thus, authority is reconfigured as a function of algorithmic visibility, not epistemic competence (Akpinar & Fazelpour, 2024).

The legitimization of authority in the digital context is a complex process, influenced by algorithms, social platforms and the dynamics of online interactions. In the digital age, authority is no longer conferred exclusively through traditional institutions, but is negotiated through visibility, authenticity and algorithmic interaction. In the digital environment, social media algorithms play a key role in establishing the legitimacy of public and informal actors. They determine what content is visible, which voices are amplified and which forms of authority are validated. Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer (2022) show that algorithms affect decision-making legitimacy in three dimensions: input (participation), throughput (transparent processing) and output (results perceived as fair). Lack of transparency and human control can undermine trust in authority, especially when decisions are automated.

On platforms like Instagram, digital influence is negotiated through what Kelley Cotter (2019) calls the "visibility game," a set of unwritten, algorithmically driven rules that influencers learn and exploit to gain legitimacy. This legitimacy is not based on formal expertise, but on perceived authenticity, frequency, and engagement.

Furthermore, Abiri and Guidi (2023) point out that social platforms attempt to legitimize their power by imitating traditional institutions (such as courts or corporations), but fail because they cannot provide democratic guarantees or real transparency. Legitimacy is not achieved through form alone, but through social acceptance of authority and the perception that it serves the public interest

In this context, the present study, The Influence of Social Media Algorithms on Youth Perception of Authority: Between Digital Validation and Institutional Contestation, offers a contribution by directly examining this duality. Through a qualitative approach focused on youth experiences, the research can illuminate the mechanisms by which algorithms shape attitudes toward authority and provide a foundation for educational and policy interventions tailored to algorithmic realities.

4. The aim and objective of the paper

The general aim of this research is to investigate how social media algorithms influence the visibility and validation of various forms of authority in the digital environment, and to understand the impact of these mechanisms on young people's perceptions of institutional and informal authority. The study seeks to analyze how algorithmic technologies shape online content consumption and contribute to the formation of youth attitudes toward power, legitimacy, and social control. The research objectives were:

1. To analyze how social media algorithms influence the visibility of content associated with different forms of authority (institutional vs. informal), in relation to young people's preferences and consumption behaviors;

2. To investigate young people's perceptions of traditional authority (school, family, public institutions) in the context of constant exposure to personalized algorithmic content;

3. To explore the mechanisms through which informal authority (influencers, online communities) is validated and reinforced in the digital environment;

4. To identify differences in attitudes toward authority among young people with varying levels of exposure to and interaction with social media (intensity, preferred platforms, types of content consumed);

5. To assess the impact of algorithms on the formation of opinions, trust, and civic behaviors among youth, with a focus on tendencies toward contestation, polarization, or withdrawal from the public sphere.

This study employed a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews, aiming to explore in depth young people's perceptions, attitudes, and experiences regarding authority and the influence of social media algorithms. This method enabled the capture of subjective nuances in the relationship with authority, an understanding of how algorithms shape content and behavior, and an exploration of informal authority validation in digital environments.

The data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview with flexible thematic guidance. The main topics addressed included: perceptions of institutional authority, interaction with social media, algorithmic influence, validation of informal authority, attitudes toward authority, and civic and social behaviors. The research sample consisted of 43 young people aged 16 to 24 from Abrud, Alba County, Romania, including high school and university students. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure diversity in educational background, platform usage (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, etc.), and levels of online engagement. Purposive sampling allows for the selection of participants with relevant experiences and perspectives, providing rich and nuanced qualitative data (Palinkas et al., 2015). Furthermore, research shows that young people exhibit low levels of trust in traditional institutions but grant greater legitimacy to informal leaders in the online environment (CIRCLE, 2025). Thus, this category becomes fertile ground for exploring new forms of authority and influence. Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and online (via WhatsApp), depending on participants' availability. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed for analysis. Data were processed using thematic analysis, involving the following steps: transcription of interviews, initial

coding, grouping of codes into themes and subthemes, and interpretation of results in relation to the research objectives.

The analytical process unfolded in several successive stages, each contributing to the structuring and validation of interpretative categories. Initially, all interviews were transcribed in full, preserving the authenticity of the participants' expressions and formulations. This step ensured a close engagement with the lived experiences of the respondents and provided a robust foundation for the subsequent coding phase. Coding was conducted inductively, without relying on a predefined list of codes. Instead, codes were derived directly from the empirical material, based on semantic relevance and frequency of occurrence. Following the initial coding, the data were organized into themes and sub-themes, reflecting recurring patterns in the participants' responses. Among the central themes identified were: "contestation of institutional authority," "validation of influencers as sources of authority," "algorithmic filtering and content personalization," and "attitudes toward social control." The sub-themes allowed for further refinement of the analysis, highlighting variations in positioning and differences in perception depending on the level of exposure to digital environments. To ensure the validity of the thematic categories, the researcher employed multiple methodological strategies. First, internal triangulation was conducted by comparing responses across different interviews to verify the consistency of the identified themes. Second, a random recoding of selected interviews was performed to test the stability and reproducibility of the coding process. Third, each theme was systematically correlated with the research objectives and questions, ensuring analytical relevance in relation to the study's aims. In certain cases, participatory validation was also applied, by informally soliciting feedback from respondents to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations. Through this approach, thematic analysis enabled not only a coherent organization of the data but also the formulation of meaningful conclusions regarding the ways in which social media algorithms shape young people's perceptions of authority in a context marked by informational fragmentation and the reconfiguration of social legitimacy.

5. Results and discussions

5.1. Description of the investigated sample

The sample investigated was composed, as shown in the table below (table 1), of 43 young people between the ages of 15 and 24, intentionally selected based on their belonging to the age category with the most intensive use of social networks. The group included 22 high school students and 21 university students, coming from an urban environment, active in the online environment and, in some cases, involved in civic activities. The distribution by age and gender groups was as follows:

Table 1: Distribution of Young People by Gender and Age

Age (years)		*Number of Boys*	*Number of Girls*	*Total*
15	high school student	3	3	6
16	high school student	3	3	6
17	high school student	3	3	6
18	high school student	2	2	4
19	university student	1	1	2
20	university student	1	2	3
21	university student	2	2	4
22	university student	2	2	4
23	university student	2	2	4
24	university student	2	2	4
Total		21	22	43

The choice of the purposive sampling method was determined by the specifics of the research, which aims to understand in depth how social networks influence young people's perception of authority. Pupils and students are in a stage of identity and relational formation, being intensely exposed to digital content and new forms of informal authority. Although the sample is not statistically representative, the deliberate selection allowed for relevant and nuanced perspectives, in line with the exploratory objectives of the study.

5.2. Use of social network

Regarding the use of social media by young people, the results obtained in the research showed us the following patterns:

1. *Entertainment and Relaxation*.
   Social media is used for fun, humor, and spending free time.

   "Mostly TikTok for fun" (A, 15 years old, student);
   "TikTok for quick entertainment" (10, boy, 16 years old, student);
   "TikTok for funny videos" (boy, 15 years old, student);
   "Definitely TikTok, then Instagram" (E, girl, 16 years old, student).

2. *Information and Learning*.
   Platforms are sometimes used for tutorials, technical or educational explanations.

   "YouTube for tutorials related to tools or mechanics" (6, boy, 16 years old, student);
   "YouTube for practical tutorials and projects" (boy, 18 years old, student);
   "YouTube for tutorials and explanations about technology" (A, girl, 17 years old, student);
   "YouTube for tech tutorials and gadgets" (boy, 18 years old, student).

3. *Socializing and Staying Connected with Friends*
   Instagram and other platforms are used to follow the activity of friends and classmates:

   "Instagram to see what classmates and friends are doing" (boy, 15 years old, student);
   "Instagram for friends and group updates" (boy, 18 years old, student);
   "Instagram for classmates and friends" (A, girl, 15 years old, student);
   "Instagram to communicate with friends" (boy, 21 years old, student).

Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc, 2025, *10*(2), pp. 59-84
ISSN: 2531-3975

4. *Balanced and Conscious Use*
   Some young people mention using social media in moderation, avoiding dependency:

   > "Daily, but with limits. I use it more for information and communication, not just for fun." (19, A, girl, 18 years old, student);
   > "Daily, but I try not to overdo it. I like to get inspired from there, but I don't want to depend on it." (M, girl, 15 years old, student);
   > "Daily, but in moderation. I try not to waste too much time." (girl, 18 years old, student).

5. *Professional or Educational Use*
   Social media is also used for professional or school-related development.

   > "LinkedIn and YouTube. TikTok less, because it feels too chaotic." – 19, A, girl, 18 years old, economics
   > "Facebook only for school stuff or announcements." (M, girl, 17 years old, student);
   > "Facebook more rarely, for news and groups." (boy, 17 years old, student);

6. *Gaming and Video Content*
   YouTube is frequently mentioned for content related to video games:

   > "YouTube for gameplay and tutorials" (boy, 15 years old, student);
   > "YouTube for gaming and tutorials" (boy, 16 years old, student);
   > "YouTube for gameplay and vlogs" (A, 15 years old, student).

Social media is an integral part of young people's daily lives, being used every day, especially during moments of relaxation (in the evening, during breaks, or on the way to school). Their usage is diverse, but several dominant patterns emerge:

1. Entertainment and relaxation are the most common purposes, especially through TikTok and YouTube, which offer short, humorous, and accessible content.

2. Information and learning are present particularly among students in technical fields, who use YouTube for tutorials and practical explanations.

3. Socializing remains an important goal, especially through Instagram, which helps maintain connections with classmates and friends.

4. There is also an awareness of the risks related to excessive screen time, with some young people stating they set limits or avoid platforms that are too addictive.

5. Although less common, social media platforms are occasionally utilized for educational and professional purposes, such as accessing information through LinkedIn networks or specialized Facebook groups.

This variety of uses reflects young people's adaptability to the digital environment, as well as their need for balance between entertainment, information, and social interaction.

5.3. Frequency of use of social networks

The frequency of social media use is a relevant aspect for the purpose of the research. The data obtained from the interviews showed us the following:

1. *Constant Use* (Daily, frequently, almost non-stop)
   This category includes young people who report using social media daily, multiple times a day, or almost continuously. Examples:

   > "Daily, honestly. It's just normal, I go online several times a day, especially on the way to school or in the evening." (A, 15 years old, student);
   > "Every day, bro. Mostly in the evening or when I have a break from school stuff." (A., boy, 18 years old, student);
   > "Daily, almost non-stop. When I wake up, at school, at home — I'm always scrolling." (M, girl, 17 years old, student);
   > "Very often, almost all the time when I'm home or on break." (C, girl, 16 years old, student).

2. *Moderate Use* (Daily, but mostly in the evening, during breaks, or with a certain routine)
   This category reflects regular use, but integrated into a more balanced daily schedule. Examples:

   > "Daily, mostly in the evening and during breaks between classes." (boy, 15 years old, student);
   > "Daily, mostly in the evening and when I have free time, but I don't stay on non-stop." (boy, 17 years old, student);
   > "Daily, especially after school and in the evening." (boy, 17 years old, student);
   > "Daily, but not all the time. Mostly in the evening or during breaks." (boy, 17 years old, student);

3. *Occasional or Controlled Use* (With clear limits, avoiding excess, conscious use)
   This category includes young people who report using social media in moderation, avoiding dependency or time-wasting. Examples:

   > "Daily, but with limits. I use them more for information and communication, not just for fun." – 19. A., girl, 18 years old, student);
   > "Daily, but in moderation. I try not to waste too much time." (girl, 18 years old, student);
   > "Daily, but I try not to overdo it. I like to get inspired from there, but I don't want to depend on it." (M, girl, 15 years old, student).

The use of social media among young people is nearly universal and constant, but it varies in intensity and regularity. Most young people report daily use, either continuously or as part of their daily routine (in the morning, during breaks, or in the evening). At the same time, some adopt a more conscious and balanced approach, setting personal limits to avoid dependency or time-wasting. This diversity in usage frequency reflects young people's adaptability to the digital environment, as well as their capacity for self-regulation in relation to technology.

Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc, 2025, *10*(2), pp. 59-84
ISSN: 2531-3975

5.4 Interactions with algorithms

The algorithms that govern the functioning of social media platforms play an important role in shaping young people's perceptions. Regarding this aspect, I obtained the following response patterns that describe young people's interaction with them:

1. *Content is personalized based on user preferences*
   Most young people notice that algorithms show them content similar to what they have previously watched, liked, or searched for.

   > "Yes, definitely. I often get football clips, gaming stuff, and sometimes memes. If I like or spend more time on a clip, I keep getting more of the same." (boy, 15 years old, student);
   > "It's obvious. If I watch an Arduino tutorial, my feed quickly fills up with similar stuff." (boy, 16 years old, student);
   > "Absolutely. For example, after watching a few clips about digital marketing, I start seeing more and more on the same topic." (boy, 18 years old, student).

2. *Algorithms can influence personal opinions and choices*
   Many young people admit that repeated exposure to the same type of content can change their perceptions, preferences, or even beliefs:

   > "I've changed my opinion about something after seeing many clips on that topic." (boy, 15 years old, student);
   > "You start to think it's normal or that everyone thinks the same." (boy, 15, years old, student);
   > "I end up thinking it should interest me too." (girl, 18, years old, student);
   > "I risk ending up in an echo chamber where I'm only exposed to similar opinions." (boy, 17 years old, student).

3. *Algorithms can spark curiosity and help discover new interests*
   Some young people see algorithms as helpful in exploring new domains or ideas:

   > "I think they made me curious to discover new topics." (boy, 18 years old, student);
   > "I discovered new fields just because the algorithm showed them to me." (girl, 17 years old, student);
   > "Sometimes they help me find useful information or new perspectives." (girl, 18 years old);

4. *Repetitive content can create a false sense of social norm*
   Seeing the same type of content repeatedly can lead to the perception that a certain viewpoint is universally accepted:

   > "If you always see the same type of clips, you start to believe what they promote is right." (boy, 15 years old, student);
   > "I start to consider them more accepted or 'normal'." (girl, 24 years old, university student)
   > "You start to think everyone thinks the same." (boy, 16 years old, student).

5. *Algorithms contribute to social comparison and pressure to conform*
   Especially among girls, algorithms are perceived as influencing beauty standards, style, or behavior:

   > "You start comparing yourself without realizing." (girl, 15 years old, student);

> "Especially when I see clips with products or ideas about how you 'should' be."(girl, 16 years old);
> "I end up wanting the same things, even if I don't need them." (girl, 16 years old, student).

6. *Conscious filtering and resistance to algorithmic influence*
   Some young people say algorithms don't influence their opinions because they maintain the ability to filter information:

> "No. I think I can filter information and research before making a choice." (girl, 15 years old, student);
> "I don't think they influence me... I ignore or report videos that go against my views." (girl, 23 years old, university student);
> "If something raises questions, I check the information from at least three different expert sources." (girl, 23 yers old, university student).

The responses collected in the section regarding interaction with algorithms reveal a nuanced understanding among young users regarding the mechanisms and effects of algorithmic content curation on social media platforms. The majority of participants demonstrate awareness that the content they encounter is tailored to their individual preferences, shaped by prior interactions such as likes, searches, and viewing duration. This personalization is generally perceived as effective, yet it also raises concerns about the potential for cognitive bias and the reinforcement of echo chambers.

A significant proportion of respondents acknowledge that repeated exposure to similar content can subtly influence their opinions, preferences, and even perceived norms. This phenomenon is particularly evident in areas such as consumer behavior, social comparison, and ideological alignment. Conversely, some participants report a conscious effort to filter and critically assess the information presented to them, suggesting varying degrees of media literacy and resistance to algorithmic influence.

Moreover, the data indicate that algorithms can serve both as facilitators of discovery by introducing users to new interests and domains, and as agents of conformity, by amplifying dominant trends and suppressing diversity of thought. These findings underscore the importance of fostering critical digital competencies among youth, enabling them to navigate algorithmically mediated environments with discernment and autonomy. In sum, the study highlights the dual role of algorithms as both enablers and constrainers of informational diversity and personal agency, calling for further educational and ethical reflection on their design and impact in youth digital culture.

5.5. Perceived trust of traditional institutions

Based on the responses in the interviews, several categories of perception regarding school authority, teachers, and public institutions were identified:

7. *Authority is respected when it is justified and clearly communicated*
   This category reflects a positive perception of authority when it is exercised with respect, explanation, and openness:

> "Some teachers really respect you, and it's easy to respect their authority too." (A., boy, 15 years old, student);
> "I think authority should be based on mutual respect, not fear." (A., girl, 18 years old, student);

Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc, 2025, *10*(2), pp. 59-84
ISSN: 2531-3975

> "Respect must be earned, and that says it all. Authority should not be imposed." (T., girl, 22 years old, university student);
> "I respect the authority of the school and teachers, but I don't always take it as absolute." (D., girl, 23 years old, university student).

8. *Authority perceived as arbitrary imposition without explanation*
   Many respondents criticize the lack of justification for rules and the tendency of some teachers or institutions to impose authority without dialogue:

> "Others just set rules without explanation and seem to enjoy controlling everything." (boy, 15 years old, student);
> "We were told 'you're not allowed' without any explanation. The answer was just 'because that's the rule'." (boy, 16 years old, student);
> "Teachers demand respect but don't always offer it." (M., girl, 17 years old, student);
> "Authority should not be imposed, but earned." (T., girl, 22 years old, university student).

9. *Distrust or skepticism toward public institutions*
   Public institutions are often perceived as rigid, distant, and disconnected from the realities of young people:

> "Big institutions seem far from reality." (Alex, boy, 18 years old, student);
> "Public authorities seem quite distant from young people." (A., girl, 17 years old, student);
> "Large institutions are hard to approach and seem far from reality." (Boy, 16 years old, student).

10. *Critical attitudes and active contestation of authority*
    Some young people openly express dissatisfaction with institutional decisions and choose to challenge them:

> "I asked why and was told 'because that's how it is'." (Alex, boy, 18 years old, student);
> "I spoke with the class teacher and calmly explained what I thought was unfair." (A., girl, 18 years old, student);
> "I've had several moments when I challenged institutional authority." (R., girl, 17 years old, student);
> "I think it's healthy to ask questions and seek explanations, not just accept everything you're told." (M., girl, 24 years old, university student).

11. *Authority seen as necessary for social order*
    This category reflects a more institutional view, where authority is seen as a mechanism for social organization:

> "I see them as mechanisms for maintaining social order." (D., boy, 17 years old, student);
> "I believe it's necessary to maintain order and peace among individuals." (R., boy, 21 years old, university student);
> "I think it's important to have rules and structure, but also flexibility and dialogue." (M., girl, 24 years old, university student.)

The perceptions of institutional authority among students and young adults are nuanced and often critical. While many respondents acknowledge the necessity of authority for maintaining order and structure, they emphasize that respect must be

earned through fairness, transparency, and communication. Authority that is imposed without explanation is frequently met with skepticism or resistance.

Public institutions are generally perceived as distant and disconnected from the realities of youth, and trust in official information is moderate—most participants prefer to verify facts through multiple sources. Contesting authority is common, especially when rules appear arbitrary or unjustified, indicating a growing demand for participatory and dialogical approaches in educational and institutional settings.

5.6. Trust in official sources

An important objective of the research was to determine trust in institutional sources of authority. The responses recorded in the interviews showed the following situations:

1. *Partial trust, with cross-verification from multiple sources*
   Most respondents express moderate trust, preferring to compare official information with other sources:

   > "I prefer to check multiple sources, especially if the topic is important or controversial." (girl, 19 years old, university student);
   > "Partially. Some information is accurate, others just look good." (C., girl, 16 years old, student);
   > "Yes, but not blindly. I think it's normal to verify information." (A., girl, 18 years old, student);
   > "I always verify information from official sources." (H., girl, 23 years old, university student).

2. *Distrust or skepticism toward official sources*
   Some young people believe that official information is incomplete, polished, or manipulated.

   > "Not really. They usually say what they want us to believe, not the full truth." (M., girl, 17 years old, student)
   > "Not always. Sometimes I feel they hide the bad parts or only say what suits them." (A., boy, 15 years old, student);
   > "Not really. Some are okay, but many just look good or tell half the truth." (V., boy, 16 years old, student);
   > "I don't know, because they never say anything concrete even if it comes from official sources." (T., girl, 22 years old, university student).

3. *Conditional trust based on transparency and evidence*
   These respondents trust official sources only when they provide clear evidence and transparency:

   > "I trust official sources when they are transparent and well-argued." (D., girl, 23 years old, university student);
   > "I trust institutions more when they offer transparency and clear proof." (A., girl, 18 years old, university student);
   > "Yes, especially when the topic is objective and easy to verify." (D., boy, 17 years old, student).

4. *General trust in official sources*
   This category includes respondents who express consistent trust in official information without significant doubts:

> "Yes, I trust information from official sources and usually verify them." (Alexia, girl, 21 years old, university student)
> "I trust information from official sources because they provide evidence." (R., boy, 21 years old, university student)
> "I generally trust information from official sources." (L., girl, 24 years old, university student).

Most young respondents show partial or conditional trust in official sources, often verifying information through multiple channels. While some express general confidence, many are skeptical, citing lack of transparency or perceived bias. Trust is largely dependent on clarity, evidence, and relevance to their lived experiences.

5.7. Challenging authority

The experience reported by young people in this regard is comprised of the following types of situations:

1. *Challenging rules imposed without explanation*
   This is the most common form of contestation, especially in school settings, where students question rules perceived as arbitrary:

   > "We were told 'you're not allowed' without any explanation. I asked why and the answer was just 'because that's the rule'." (Boy, 16 years old, student);
   > "A new rule was imposed — no phones at all during class, not even during breaks. I said it was absurd and discussed it with the class teacher." (M., girl, 17 years old, tourism profile);
   > "We were told 'you're not allowed to do that' without explaining why. I asked and the answer was just 'because that's how it is'." (Alex, boy, 18 years old, student).

2. *Challenging decisions perceived as unfair*
   Some respondents questioned authority in situations where they perceived injustice or preferential treatment:

   > "When I saw unfairness at school, for example, grades given preferentially. I spoke calmly with the class teacher about what I thought wasn't right." (A., girl, 18 years old, student);
   > "A teacher at my former high school yelled at a classmate just because she had some cups on her desk." (R., boy, 21 years old, university student);
   > "I noticed many cases of bullying that were ignored." (R., girl, 17 years old, student).

3. *Challenging through dialogue and initiative*
   These respondents chose to question authority through constructive discussion or active involvement:

   > "I discussed with the class teacher and classmates, and eventually some things changed." (A., girl, 18 years old, student);
   > "I think it's healthy to ask questions and seek explanations, not just accept everything you're told." (M., girl, 24 years old, university student);
   > "I believe it's important for each of us to do this at some point, in a thoughtful way." (L., girl, 24 years old, university student).

4. *Challenging institutional authority beyond school*
   A few respondents mentioned experiences of contestation in broader contexts, outside the educational environment.

> "CG's campaign is the best example." (P., boy, 24 years old, university student);
> "I questioned institutional authority in situations where it was exercised just for the sake of it, not for a real purpose." (R., boy, 21 years old, university student).

Most respondents have experienced situations where they questioned institutional authority, especially in school settings. These challenges often arose from rules imposed without explanation, perceived injustices, or lack of transparency. While some reacted through direct confrontation, others chose dialogue and constructive engagement, showing a growing tendency among youth to critically evaluate and respond to authority rather than accept it passively. The interview analysis reveals that young people perceive institutional authority with increasing critical awareness. They often challenge rules that lack explanation, question decisions they see as unfair, and prefer dialogue over passive acceptance. Trust in official sources is conditional, depending on transparency, clarity, and relevance. In this context, social networks play a significant role in shaping perceptions of authority. They offer alternative narratives, peer validation, and rapid access to diverse viewpoints, which encourages fact-checking, skepticism, and critical thinking. Social media amplifies awareness of institutional shortcomings and empowers youth to contest authority, especially when traditional channels fail to provide clarity or fairness. Thus, social networks act both as informational filters and mobilizing platforms, reinforcing the demand for more participatory and responsive institutions.

5.8. Informal authority

In this research, we were interested in assessing the trust in informal sources of authority that are accessed by them in the virtual space. The responses received show us the following situations:

1. *Authenticity and Naturalness*
   Many young people are drawn to influencers who seem honest, genuine, and not acting a role.

   > "I like those who create honest content, without seeming like they're playing a role." (V., boy, 20 years old, student);
   > "I like those who are natural and sincere, without trying to show off." (V., boy, 16 years old, student).

2. *Practical and Educational Content*
   Some follow influencers because they offer useful information, tutorials, or applicable advice:

   > "I like those who show how to build or fix something, not just jokes or ads." (C., girl, 16 years old);
   > "I like those who make practical tutorials or show how to use gadgets." (A., girl, 15 years old, student).

3. *Humor and Entertainment*
   For some, the appeal lies in the influencer's fun and relaxed personality:

   > "I like the funny ones, who are sincere and don't pretend to be someone else." (C., girl, 16 years old, commerce student);
   > "I follow most of them for their humorous content." (A., girl, 21 years old, university student).

4. *Lifestyle and Personal Inspiration*
   Some are attracted to the influencer's lifestyle, which they find aspirational or motivating.

   > "I'm drawn to their lifestyle." (L., girl, 24 years old, university student);
   > "Their lifestyle, the activities they do." (T., girl, 22 years old, university student).

5. *Clarity and Simplicity of Explanations*
   Young people appreciate influencers who explain complex things in an accessible way:

   > "I like when they explain things clearly, not just talk to sound good." (A., girl, 17 years old, student);
   > "I'm drawn to their authenticity and the way they explain things simply but intelligently." (A., boy, 18 years old, student).

6. *Validation of Personal Values*
   Some follow influencers because they feel their own ideas and values are confirmed:

   > "What attracts me to them [...] is that I feel my ideas are validated." (R., boy, 21 years old, student);
   > "Their opinions [...] align with mine. That's why I follow them." (D., girl, 23 years old, student).

7. *Criticism of Fake or Commercial Influencers*
   There's also a critical attitude toward influencers perceived as fake or motivated only by money:

   > "If they say 'this is the best product' in every video, then no." (E., girl, 16 years old);
   > "I don't trust their recommendations because they're paid to promote products." (L., girl, 24 years old, university student).

According to the results obtained from the research, most of the young respondents follow influencers and content creators because they find in them sources of authenticity, useful information, entertainment, and personal inspiration. Their choices are driven by a need for value alignment, clarity in communication, and a rejection of content perceived as fake or overly commercial. Thus, influencers become relevant social and cultural reference points in the everyday lives of young people.

5.9. Young people's trust in content creators

An important element of the assessment regarding trust in authority was the trust that young people have in content creators and the reason why they follow their recommendations. The responses received show many reasons:

1. *Personal Experience of the Influencer*
   Young people trust influencers when they see that they genuinely use the product or speak from real experience:

   > "Only if I see they actually use the product or speak from experience." (V., boy, 20 years old, student);

> "If it's clear they use what they promote, yes. Otherwise, not really." (Boy, 16 years old, student).

2. *Authenticity and Sincerity*
   Trust is built when influencers seem honest and not just motivated by money:

> "Only if I see they're realistic and not just promoting products for money." (A., girl, 18 years old, student);
> "If they seem sincere and don't promote just anything for money, I can trust them." (M., girl, 24 years old).

3. *Argumentation and Logic*
   Some young people trust influencers only when their opinions are backed by reasoning and facts.

> "It matters that they argue their point and not just give random opinions." (A., girl, 20 years old, student);
> "Yes, if they bring logical arguments and base their claims on facts, not just opinions." (A., girl, 17 years old, student).

4. *Shared Personal Values*
   Young people follow influencers whose opinions and values align with their own:

> "Their opinions [...] match mine. That's why I follow them." (D., girl, 23 years old, student);
> "I often overlook ideas when they match my values." (R., boy, 21 years old, student).

5. *Visible and Functional Results*
   Trust is conditional on seeing that the recommendations actually work:

> "Only if I see they use what they recommend and the results really work." (Boy, 16 years old, student);
> "Only if it's clear they use what they recommend and the results are effective." (C., girl, 16 years old, student).

6. *Selectivity and Skepticism*
   Some young people are aware of marketing tactics and maintain a critical attitude:

> "I don't trust their recommendations because they're paid to promote products." (L., girl, 24 years old, university student);
> "I prefer to form my opinions based on facts, events, statistics [...] rather than trust influencer recommendations." (D., boy, 17 years old, student).

Young people's trust in influencers is shaped by a complex mix of emotional, practical, and cognitive factors. They are primarily drawn to influencers who appear authentic and natural, avoiding those who seem scripted or insincere. Influencers who offer practical and educational content especially tutorials or advice with visible results are highly valued. Humor and entertainment also play a significant role, as does the aspirational lifestyle some influencers portray. Moreover, young audiences appreciate influencers who communicate with clarity and simplicity, making complex ideas accessible. Trust is further reinforced when influencers validate personal values, creating a sense of ideological alignment. However, this trust is not unconditional: many young people express skepticism toward commercialized

content, especially when influencers appear motivated solely by financial gain. These insights reveal that influencer credibility among youth is not just about popularity, but about perceived authenticity, relevance, and integrity.

5.10. How does trust in traditional versus informal institutions differ among young people?

The most important aspect of this research was to determine the differences in perceptions of authority between formal and informal sources present in the virtual environment. The responses received show the following:

1. *Proximity and relatable language*
   Influencers are perceived as closer to young people in terms of age, language, and style of communication:

   > "They speak our language, more connected to reality than teachers or authorities." (boy, 15 years old, student);
   > "Influencers are closer to us and easier to understand than teachers or politicians." (V., boy, 16 years old, student.

2. *Accessibility and constant presence*
   Influencers are present daily in young people's digital lives, unlike institutions which are seen as distant or rigid:

   > "They are always present in our lives through social media. Institutions seem rigid or disconnected from reality." (D., girl, 23 years old, university student);
   > "Young people spend more time on social media than in school or watching official channels." (H., girl, 23 years old, university student).

3. *Emotional connection and community*
   Online communities and influencers offer a sense of belonging and emotional resonance that institutions fail to provide:

   > "Young people need to feel they belong to a community that cares. Institutions feel cold and bureaucratic." (D., boy, 17 years old, student);
   > "In online communities, young people receive validation that traditional institutions don't offer." (R., boy, 21 years old, university student).

4. *Distrust in traditional institutions*
   Some respondents express skepticism or disappointment toward institutions, which they perceive as ineffective or indifferent:

   > "Institutions close their eyes to young people, which makes us feel ignored." (I., girl, 23 years old, university student);
   > "Institutions treat young people with superiority and speak down to them." (T., girl, 22 years old, university student).

5. *Influence through simplicity and clarity*
   Influencers are seen as better communicators, using simple and direct language that resonates with youth:

   > "They explain things clearly and in a way we understand, unlike teachers or authorities." (Boy, 16 years old, student);
   > "They don't talk like a textbook, like some adults do." (C., girl, 16 years old, commerce student).

6. *Influence through authenticity*
   Influencers are perceived as more real and trustworthy than institutions, which are seen as formal and impersonal:

> "Influencers seem more real. Institutions feel cold, like faceless rules." (M., girl, 15 years old, student);
> "They are perceived as 'one of us', unlike traditional institutions that seem outdated." (M., girl, 24 years old, university student).

Young people perceive influencers and online communities as more credible and influential than traditional institutions because they communicate in a relatable, authentic, and accessible way. Unlike institutions, which are often seen as distant, rigid, or disconnected from youth realities, influencers offer proximity, emotional resonance, and a sense of belonging. Their language is simple, their presence constant, and their messages often align with the values and everyday experiences of young audiences.

5.11. Sources of information on social, political and other issues

The sources of information used by young people regarding social, political and other issues differ significantly from those used by previous generations. Here are the answers of the young people interviewed on this topic:

1. *Information through social media and short video content (TikTok, YouTube)*
This is the most common category, showing a preference for fast, accessible formats:

> "Usually from YouTube or TikTok, short clips that explain things simply." (V., boy, 20 years old, university student);
> "TikTok and YouTube, quick clips." (boy, 15 years old, student);
> "Short clips on TikTok and YouTube tutorials." (boy, 16 years old, vocational school).

2. *Mixed sources: video and online articles*
   Some young people combine quick sources with articles or news when they want to go deeper:

> "If it's something important, I also look for articles, but I admit I don't really have the patience to read everything." (V., boy, 20 years old, university student);
> "If it's something serious, I also look for articles or online news." (girl, 18 years old, student);
> "I get information from multiple sources – usually I read online articles, follow posts and explanatory clips on social media." (M., girl, 24 years old, university student).

3. *Verified and diverse sources*
   These respondents actively seek trustworthy sources, verify information, and are concerned with its quality:

> "I look for varied sources, articles, podcasts, sometimes interviews. I like to understand multiple perspectives before forming an opinion." (A., girl, 18 years old, student);
> "I get informed from various online sources – news, podcasts, content creators I trust, sometimes social media, but I verify the information." (D., girl, 23 years old, university student);

Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc, 2025, *10*(2), pp. 59-84
ISSN: 2531-3975

> "Usually I get information from my feed, then I verify it using Google or AI tools." (R., boy, 21 years old, university student).

4. *Information through trusted people or communities*
   Some young people rely on trusted individuals or online communities to filter information:

> "From trusted pages (like Recorder, ANOSR), or from political figures I believe in (Nicu Ștefănuță)." (Alexia, girl, 21 years old, university student);
> "From sources I trust and people I respect." (P., boy, 24 years old, university student);
> "I also talk to trusted people like teachers or professionals in the field." (R., girl, 17 years old, student).

5. *Passive or occasional information*
   These young people don't actively seek information but come across it incidentally or through informal discussions:

> "Mostly from TikTok or from talking with classmates." (M., girl, 15 years old, student);
> "From TikTok, Insta, and also from classmates. If I see something interesting, I Google it." (C., girl, 16 years old, student);
> "I search on Google if something interests me." (T., girl, 22 years old, university student).

The interviewed youth exhibit diverse informational practices, reflecting varying levels of cognitive and civic engagement. The majority favor short-form video content (TikTok, YouTube), valued for its accessibility and speed, indicating a tendency toward superficial information consumption. Some respondents combine these formats with online articles when the topic is perceived as important, showing a situational openness to deeper inquiry. A smaller segment adopts a reflective approach, verifying sources and seeking multiple perspectives, suggesting advanced informational competence. Others rely on trusted individuals or communities to filter information, highlighting the role of social trust and ideological affinity. Finally, some youth engage with information passively or incidentally, which may hinder the development of critical thinking and civic involvement.

5.12. Young people's participation in civic actions, protests, or online campaigns,

Trust in alternative sources of authority is reflected in the involvement of young people in various civic activities. The answers recorded in the interviews show us the following regarding this influence:

1. *Online-only participation* (sharing, signing petitions, digital campaigns)
   Most young people reported participating in civic actions exclusively online, such as signing petitions or sharing campaigns:

> "I signed an online petition about city transport and shared it further." (V., boy, 20 years old, university student);
> "I shared online campaigns for the environment or animals, but nothing physical." (Boy, 15 years old, student);
> "Only online, I shared campaigns for the environment or animals." (Girl, 15 years old, student).

2. *Both physical and online participation*
   Some respondents have taken part in both physical protests and online campaigns. Illustrative quotes:

> "Yes, I participated in online campaigns and signed petitions. I also took part in physical protests." (D., girl, 23 years old, university student)
> "Yes, I participated in a blood donation campaign and a fundraiser for underprivileged students." (A., girl, 18 years old, student);
> "Yes, I took part in a recycling campaign in my city and helped promote it on Instagram." (A., girl, 18 years old, student).

3. *Physical participation only* (actual or intended)
   Some young people expressed a willingness to participate in physical protests or have already done so, without mentioning online involvement:

> "I haven't been to physical protests yet, but I would go if I felt it was an important cause." (girl, 19 years old, university student);
> "Yes, I participated in civic actions and protests." (I., girl, 23 years old, university student).

4. *No participation, but interest or openness*
   These respondents have not participated in civic actions but express openness or interest in doing so in the future;

> "I haven't participated!" (M., girl, 24 years old, student);
> "Not in protests, but I shared online campaigns." (A., boy, 15 years old, student).

5. *No participation and lack of interest*
   A small number of respondents stated they have not participated and showed little interest in civic involvement. Illustrative quotes:

> "*No*." (T., girl, 22 years old, university student).

Youth civic engagement occurs predominantly in the digital sphere, with most respondents participating by signing petitions and sharing online campaigns. A smaller segment combines online participation with physical actions, indicating a broader civic commitment. Some young people express willingness to engage in physical protests, even if they have not yet done so, while others show interest without prior involvement. A minority reports no participation and no interest in civic actions. These responses reflect varying levels of civic motivation among the participants.

5.13. The role of social networks in motivating young people to engage in civic activities

What role do social networks play in motivating young people to engage in civic activities, do they motivate or demotivate? The answers given by young people in interviews show us a complex situation:

a) Encouraging participation

1. *Motivation Through Others' Example*

> "If I see others doing something concrete, it motivates me to join in too." (A., boy, 18 years old, student);

"Social media can motivate me, especially when I see others getting involved—especially people I admire and resonate with". (D., girl, 23 years old, university student).

2. *Accessibility and Ease of Involvement*

"I think it's cool that you can support something even from the internet." (V., boy, 20 years old, university student);
"In my case, I was encouraged to get more involved thanks to social media… coming from a small town where protests aren't organized". (R., girl, 17 years old, student).

3. *Mobilization and Visibility*

"Social media motivates me, especially when I see real mobilization and people actually doing something." (Girl, 19 years old, university student);
"Yes, I believe social media motivates me to get involved." (A., girl, 21 years old, university student);

4. *Inspiration Through Positive Content*

"When I see people doing good, I feel like I can do something too." (M., girl, 15 years old, student);
"I think it's important to support things that really matter." (E., girl, 16 years old, student).

b) Discouragement of participation

5. *Passive Scrolling and Superficiality*

"If you just like and scroll, it doesn't really help." (B., girl, 15 years old, student);
"If you just like and scroll, it discourages you and makes you forget you can do something concrete." (boy, 15 years old, student);

6. *Information Overload and Negativity*

"Sometimes they overwhelm you with too much negative news and that makes you withdraw."
(girl, 19 years old, university student);
"It motivates you, but also tires you out sometimes. There's too much information." (H., girl, 23 years old, university student).

7. *Lack of Concrete Action*

"I feel like everyone just talks, but no one does anything." (C., girl, 16 years old, student);
"Sometimes it seems like everyone just talks and no one does anything real." (E., girl, 16 years old, student);

8. *Algorithms Limiting Diversity*

"The tendency of algorithms to push only one type of content can be discouraging."
(D., boy, 17 years old, student).

c. Intermediate / Contextual Categories

9. *Depends on Personal Mood*

> "Depends on my mood. Sometimes it inspires me, other times I feel like everyone just talks."
> (C., girl, 16 years old, student).

10. *Depends on How Social Media Is Used*

> "You can waste time or you can learn something useful and help." (A., girl, 17 years old, student);
> "Depends on how you use it. For me, it gave me the courage to get involved." (A., girl, 18 years old, student).

Social media plays an ambivalent role in shaping youth civic motivation. On one hand, it encourages engagement through the example of others, ease of access, visibility of mobilization, and inspirational content, especially for those in environments with limited offline opportunities. On the other hand, discouraging factors include passive interaction (scrolling), information overload, lack of tangible action, and algorithmic content uniformity. Additionally, perceptions of social media are often contextual, influenced by personal mood and usage patterns, highlighting the complex relationship between digital environments and civic motivation. Young people's civic engagement in the context of social media reflects a complex dynamic: digital platforms can act as motivators through accessibility and mobilization, but also as discouraging factors due to superficiality, information overload, and lack of concrete action. Engagement is often shaped by personal context and the way these platforms are used.

6. Conclusion

In today's digital landscape, young people's trust in traditional institutions of authority has undergone a notable transformation, shaped by the influence of social media algorithms on information access and norm perception. Authority is no longer accepted uncritically; instead, it is evaluated through the lens of transparency, relevance, and the institution's ability to communicate in a participatory and clear manner. Institutions perceived as rigid or disconnected from youth realities are frequently challenged, and trust in official sources is moderate, often verified through alternative channels.

Against this backdrop, influencers and content creators emerge as alternative forms of authority, more closely aligned with the emotional and value-based universe of young people. They are appreciated not only for their authenticity and natural communication style but also for their ability to provide useful information, clear explanations, and inspirational content. Trust in these figures is nuanced, built on perceived integrity and value alignment, yet quickly eroded when content appears overly commercial or manipulative.

When it comes to informing themselves about social, political, or educational issues, young people tend to favor short, accessible formats such as TikTok and YouTube videos, occasionally supplemented by articles or verified sources. This indicates a situational approach to information, shaped by personal relevance and context. Civic participation is primarily digital—through petitions and online

Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc, 2025, *10*(2), pp. 59-84
ISSN: 2531-3975

campaigns—but there is also openness to physical actions, depending on individual motivation and engagement levels.

Social media algorithms play an ambivalent role in this informational ecology: they facilitate discovery and civic mobilization, yet also encourage conformity, overexposure to homogeneous content, and the formation of echo chambers. These algorithms subtly influence not only individual preferences but also perceptions of authority, norms, and dominant values.

This study presents two main limitations. First, the findings are valid only for a specific profile of young people, namely, high school and university students, limiting the generalizability of the results. Second, the analysis treats these two distinct groups as a single category, which may overlook age-specific differences. These limitations are justified by the exploratory nature of the research, which focused on identifying response typologies rather than constructing detailed respondent profiles. Future studies could address these aspects to enhance the analytical depth and value of the empirical material.

In the light of these findings, further research is needed in several directions: comparative analysis of institutional versus informal authority in shaping civic behavior; investigation of resistance mechanisms to algorithmic influence; exploration of online communities in civic identity formation; and assessment of digital content's impact on critical thinking and informational autonomy.

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