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ALGORITHMIC INSECURITY: HOW DIGITAL PERSONALIZATION THREATENS EMOTIONAL STABILITY

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Abstract
This study examines how algorithm-driven personalized recommendations influence emotional recovery, focusing on the relationship between algorithmic exposure and users' emotional stability. The research explores the construct of algorithmic insecurity, which describes how personalization systems on social media and music platforms may reinforce negative affective states rather than support emotional regulation. A cross-sectional design was employed with 440 participants (M = 22.60 years, SD = 4.73), including 219 males (49.8%), 214 females (48.6%), 6 non-binary (1.4%), and 1 undisclosed (0.2%). Participants completed self-report measures assessing their emotional states and the nature of personalized content exposure. Findings revealed that music algorithms predominantly suggested sad or melancholic content during distressing periods, significantly more than expected ($\chi^2[2, N = 440] = 294.99, p < .001$). Longer exposure to personalized content was significantly associated with higher frequencies of sadness or distress ($\chi^2[12, N = 440] = 69.70, p < .001$), while social media exposure to mood-congruent content correlated with greater emotional instability ($\chi^2[16, N = 440] = 64.61, p < .001$).These results demonstrate that algorithmic personalization can perpetuate low mood and emotional dysregulation by continuously presenting mood-congruent content, effectively sustaining users' negative affect. The study highlights algorithmic insecurity as a psychological risk inherent in personalization systems and underscores the need to integrate emotional security into discussions of digital well-being and online safety.

Keywords: algorithmic insecurity, emotional recovery, personalization, emotional stability, social media, digital psychology

INTRODUCTION

One of the key drivers of national unrest in Nigeria is arguably insecurity. However, of all its forms, the physical (kidnapping, terrorism, ethno-religious conflict, banditry, armed robbery) and cyber dimensions have gained tremendous scholarly interest. A crucial form of insecurity that is often neglected is emotional insecurity. Just as atoms form the foundation of matter, individuals are the essential building blocks of society; when they are emotionally unstable, the overall national harmony and stability begin to crumble (Adebayo, 2021; Ede & Nwokolo, 2022).

On the other hand, the growing role of digital algorithms in personalizing and optimizing users' online experiences has posed a new threat to emotional stability. Instead of functioning purely as a content curator, these algorithms tend to echo user emotional state, which may then amplify distress, anxiety, or sadness by repeatedly exposing users to emotionally congruent content (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2018; Raffoul, Dyer, & Kross, 2023). This phenomenon is what the paper defines as *algorithmic insecurity*—a condition whereby digital systems that were designed to connect and inform now perpetuate psychological vulnerability.

The essence of this phenomenon lies in the gap between algorithmic logic and human emotional behaviour. The algorithmic engines do not consider the dynamic and subjective nature of human emotion because they treat preference as a variable that can be modeled and optimized for efficiency

(Beer, 2017; Gillespie, 2018; Jylha, Katsyri, & Oulasvirta, 2023). Emotional behaviours, unlike consumer purchasing behaviour, where the products users engage with online could be denoted as preference by the algorithm, are contextual, variable, and require regulation. Emotional behaviour changes with mood, environment, and circumstance, meaning that what the algorithm interprets as preference may only represent a fleeting emotional reaction rather than a stable psychological state. When a person experiencing low mood engages with melancholic content, the algorithm perceives this as preference and suggests similar content, which then amplifies instead of relieving the distress. Practically, the distress is converted to engagement, a process metaphorically described as *the sale of sadness* (Chen, 2023; Lv, Lin, & Cao, 2022; Eslami et al., 2015).

The ability to sustain psycho-equilibrium amid internal and external struggles has become more difficult in this new digitally curated space because what used to be passive media exposure has developed into an interactive feedback loop, where algorithms both respond to and reshape users' mood (Beer, 2017; Jylha et al., 2023). Algorithmic recommendation systems significantly influence mood, cognition, and behaviour (Raffoul et al., 2023; Angelova, Rogers, & Dhir, 2023), often limiting self-control and increasing sensitivity to negative stimuli (Koster et al., 2010; Fokker et al., 2021; Gotlib et al., 2004; Beevers & Carver, 2003).

Although this is a global issue, its implications are magnified in Nigeria because the rapid adoption of digital technology outpaces the awareness of how algorithmic logic shapes emotion. Social media and music streaming platforms are arguably a crucial aspect of daily life, making users particularly vulnerable to repeated patterns of negative reflection and emotional exhaustion, as algorithms tend to mirror and amplify their emotional states rather than balancing them (Ostic et al., 2021; Yang, Holden, & Ariati, 2021). Therefore, algorithmically curated content is not simply a matter of public health, but a psychological threat to emotional security that requires academic, clinical, and policy attention.

Drawing on the Mood Management Theory (Zillmann, 1988) and the Emotional Contagion Theory (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993), this study investigates how algorithmic recommendations mimic human responses yet lack the intelligence, empathy, and regulatory processes necessary for healthy mood management. The research argues that emotional instability in algorithmic spaces is not an accidental effect of technology but a structural consequence of personalization logic.

The key aim of the research is to explore the connection between exposure to algorithmic recommendations and emotional stability in Nigerian users of social media and music streaming sites. In particular, the researcher aimed to determine:

1. Explore the role of social media feeds and music recommendations in emotional recovery.
2. Test whether exposure to content consistent with negative emotions in a user strengthens negativity or impedes the process of getting into a positive emotional state.
3. Determine what kind of content users are subjected to when in low mood and how it affects their emotional recovery.

Research Hypotheses

1. Users are more likely to be shown content that aligns with their negative mood; for instance, when feeling low, the recommended music or media content tends to be melancholic or sad.
2. The duration of exposure to personalized content is positively associated with the frequency of expressing feelings of sadness or distress.
3. The frequency of social media exposure to personalized content is positively associated with the frequency of expressing feelings of sadness or distress.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional Stability as a Psychological and Societal Foundation

Emotional stability—the ability to maintain psychological equilibrium amid internal and external stressors—is the foundation for both individual and societal well-being. Studies have shown that the inability to regulate one's mood is associated with increased vulnerability, low resilience, and difficulties in maintaining positive affect (Friedman & Kern, 2019; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2021). When such instability persists, it manifests as civic tension, mistrust, and social fragmentation; therefore, the solidarity in a society indicates the collective emotional stability of its citizens (Adebayo, 2021; Ede & Nwokolo, 2022).

Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes emotional well-being or stability as a component of security, alongside economic, political, and physical dimensions (UNDP, 2022; De Coning, 2023). Scholars emphasize that modern security now includes emotional instability arising from constant uncertainty, media overload, and digital stress (Iwuoha & Ezeibe, 2021; Adeyemi, 2022). Emotional instability, therefore, contributes both to individual mental health risk and to collective social-stability issues. The unchecked growth of negative affect—through economic anxiety, political instability, or digital contagion—erodes the sense of safety that is necessary for constructive civic engagement (Smith & Burke, 2020; Ede & Nwokolo, 2022).

Algorithmic Mediation and Emotional Regulation

Human beings naturally use media to regulate their mood, stabilize their emotions, and reduce distress—a clear assumption of Mood Management Theory (MMT). Zillmann (1988) hypothesized that people engage with media based on their preferences with the aim of maintaining or restoring a positive affective state. Initially, the concept of self-regulation existed during the analogue media era, when users could independently decide what they wanted to engage with. Nonetheless, with the introduction and integration of algorithmic curation, this independence has been replaced by automated programming that can preemptively predict, analyze, and recommend content to users (Beer, 2017; Gillespie, 2018).

This transformation represents a significant psychological shift: the agent of emotional regulation has shifted from the individual to an algorithmic system. Although algorithmic content personalization makes digital experience more convenient, it simultaneously restructures the emotional ecology of users' digital lives. The engagement metrics (e.g., time spent, likes, facial/text expression) of recommendation engines implemented by YouTube, TikTok, and Spotify have been empirically investigated to predict emotional preferences (Jylha, Katsyri, & Oulasvirta, 2023; Raffoul, Dyer, &

Kross, 2023). In this way, these systems create a feedback loop where users' behavior both shapes and is shaped by algorithmic logic.

Although these systems were designed with users' maximum satisfaction in mind, transient affect is often misinterpreted to signify enduring preference, thereby amplifying fleeting emotions instead of supporting recovery or regulation (Angelova, Rogers, & Dhir, 2023). For example, when users interact with content that aligns with their low mood—possibly for emotional validation—the algorithm perceives this interaction as a sign of interest and delivers similar content, resulting in mood-congruent reinforcement (Koster, 2010; Fokker, Koster, & van der Does, 2021). With prolonged exposure, the default affective state becomes predominantly low, a condition described as algorithmic affective conditioning (Lv, Lin, & Cao, 2022).

The implications for emotional security are far-reaching. On one hand, MMT assumes intentionality (users choose media deliberately to maximize mood), whereas algorithmic mediation introduces the possibility of unintended reinforcement affecting mood recovery. This observation aligns with Emotional Contagion Theory, which states that emotions—whether verbal or nonverbal—can be transmitted among individuals and groups through exposure (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993). Contagion on digital platforms is not limited to human-to-human interaction anymore; rather, algorithms have become affective content distributors and multipliers at scale (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014; Brady et al., 2021).

Further empirical evidence indicates that algorithmic reinforcement leads to persistent emotional instability, especially among individuals who rely on digital or social media for social validation and emotional expression (Yang, Holden, & Ariati, 2021; Ostic et al., 2021). In such contexts, users show a lower tendency to utilize adaptive coping skills but are more prone to passive consumption, which increases affective passivity. This demonstrates that algorithmic mediation converts emotional regulation from a deliberate process to an automated, externally driven one that undermines the psychological flexibility required for emotional stability.

Algorithmic Insecurity

The psychological vulnerability that has emerged as a result of the relationship between emotional instability and automatized personalization is known as algorithmic insecurity. This construct describes situations in which users' affective states are recursively shaped by algorithmic systems that mirror and magnify emotional states rather than regulating them. In contrast to more traditional forms of insecurity, algorithmic insecurity is caused by cognitive and emotional vulnerability to digital spaces and has a distortive effect on self-regulation processes (Raffoul, Dyer, & Kross, 2023; Angelova, Rogers, & Dhir, 2023). It is a technologically mediated form of emotional dependence where users become psychologically attached to the affective logic of their personalized feeds.

Algorithmic insecurity occurs due to the gap between human emotional complexity and algorithmic simplicity. Algorithms operate based on probabilistic associations rather than contextual understanding. They predict user interaction based on previous engagement but lack the capacity to distinguish between curiosity and distress or between adaptive coping and rumination (Gillespie,

2018; Beer, 2017; Chen, 2023). This fallacy of illogicality creates a vicious cycle of emotional responses, whereby a momentary engagement with melancholic content is mistaken for preference and continually reinforced through repeated exposure. Over time, this process leads to prolonged dysphoria and reduced emotional control, particularly among those who turn to digital media as one of their main sources of companionship, distraction, or self-expression (Koster et al., 2010; Fokker et al., 2021; Eslami et al., 2015).

Recent research sheds light on how algorithmic personalization transforms the digital space into an emotional echo chamber. The filter bubble was first described in the context of information by Pariser (2011); recent studies have applied the same principles to affective content and demonstrated that social-media feeds tend to reinforce users' affective moods rather than diversify them (Jylha, Katsyri, & Oulasvirta, 2023; Lv, Lin, & Cao, 2022). This cycle creates a sense of entrapment, where one repeatedly experiences the same emotional state without relief or interruption. The phenomenon parallels cognitive bias or mood-congruent attention, in which continued exposure to negative stimuli maintains sadness or anxiety (Beevers & Carver, 2003; Gotlib et al., 2004).

With increasing internet usage, algorithmic insecurity is becoming a developing psychosocial issue. Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok dominate the information-dissemination and identity-formation spheres. Nevertheless, these same platforms also amplify emotion; economic distress, political tension, and communal fear are algorithmically recycled in digital spaces (Iwuoha & Ezeibe, 2021; Adeyemi, 2022). These dynamics are especially pronounced among young adults, who form the largest group of active users. Studies have reported rising cases of stress, digital rumination, and emotional fatigue among this group, reflecting how persistent algorithmic exposure can weaken resilience and well-being (Ostic et al., 2021; Yang, Holden, & Ariati, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional research design to examine the effect of algorithm-driven content recommendations on emotional recovery

Participants

The study recruited 440 participants, whose age ranges from 18 to 44 years and mean age of 22.60 (SD = 4.725). The gender distribution was as follows: 219 males (49.8%), 214 females (48.6%), 6 non-binary persons (1.4%), and 1 person chose not to disclose their gender (0.2%). Participants were recruited through online Google Forms, because it allows for easy data collection and response completion from any internet-enabled device.

Instruments

A structured online questionnaire was used to collect respondent responses. The questionnaire is divided into four sections, section A elicts responses on respondent's demographic information and section B collects information about respondent's social media engagement including how frequent they use music streaming platforms and section C, focus on respondent's emotional states. Section D

covers participant engagement with personalized music recommendations during moments of sadness, satisfaction with such recommendations, frequency and duration of engagement with personalized social media content. The survey also sought respondents' perceptions of the characteristics of recommended media during distressing moments.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 27). Descriptive statistics was use analyse the demographic characteristics of the sample and the survey, such as means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions. Chi-square tests of independence were conducted to test relationships between the categorical variables like the frequency of music streaming, satisfaction with personalized recommendations, exposure to social media and responder's emotional states. The chi-square analysis revealed if significant associations existed between these variables, providing insight into the relationship between personalized content recommendations and emotional recovery.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered strictly to the ethical standards for human subject research. Participants provided informed consent before participating in the research, thus, confirming their understanding of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time without reason or penalty. Data confidentiality and participant anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. All responses were secured and analyzed to ensure ethical integrity and protection of participant information.

RESULT

The data shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3 reveals the pervasive presence of social media and music streaming platforms in everyday life and the impact content personalization on the user's emotional state.

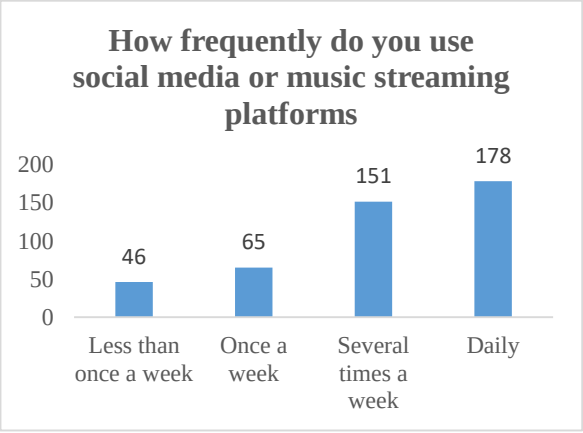

Fig. 1

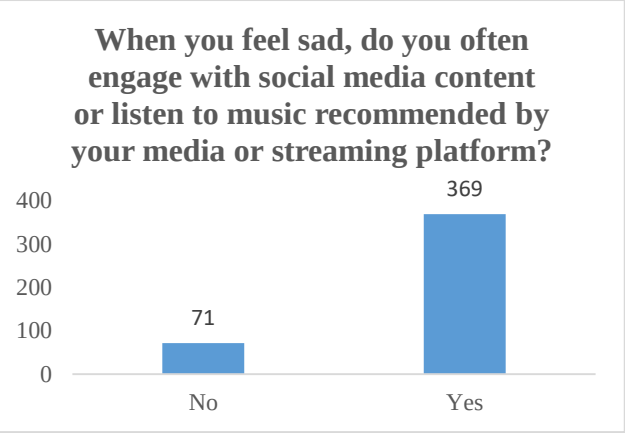

Fig. 2

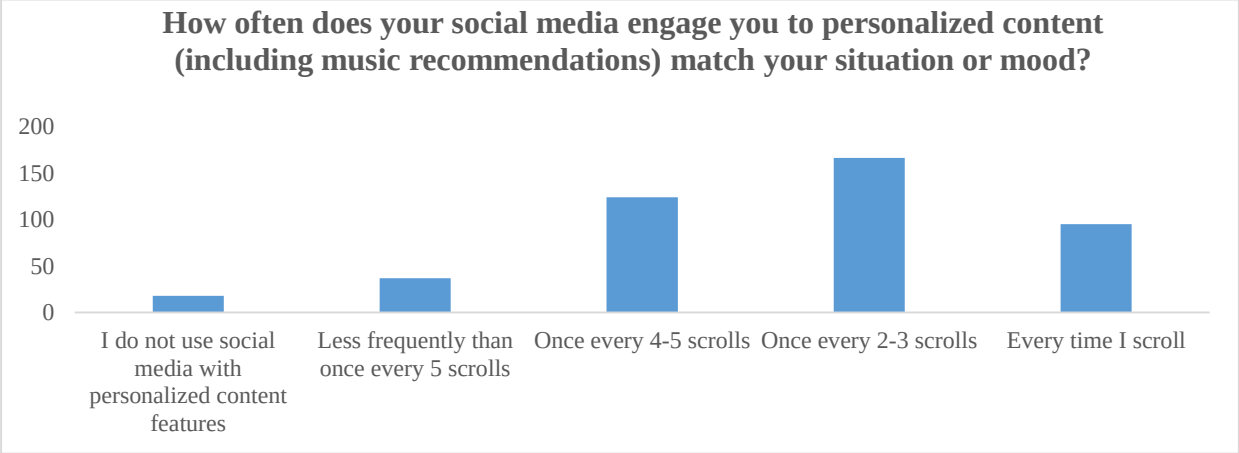

Fig. 3

As seen in Figure 1, most respondents (178 respondents) used social media and music streaming platforms daily. A smaller group of 151 respondents used these platforms two to three times a week, while usage decreased among those who engaged with these platforms once a week (65 respondents) or less than once a week (46 respondents). This indicates that a significant number of people engage with these platforms regularly, showing that they are an integral part of their daily routines.

Figure 2, further revealed that most participants (369) rely on social media or music recommendations when they felt sad. Only a small portion (71 respondents) did not rely on such recommendations when feeling low. This suggests that many users use content generated by algorithms as a coping mechanism for negative emotions, which highlight the importance of these platforms on users' emotional well-being.

Figure 3, provided deeper insight on how frequently participants encountered mood-congruent content. While few respondents reported less frequent exposure, the majority indicated that they encountered such content every two to three scrolls, with a significant number reporting exposure with each scroll. This high rate of engagement with personalized media content suggests that algorithm-driven recommendations are a regular feature of social media use for many individuals.

Table 1: Chi-Square Test for Perceptions of Music Characteristics during Sad or Distressing Moments

		Observed N	Expected N	Residuals	df	χ^2	*p*
The media content/music recommended	melancholic or sad	315	146.7	168.3	2	294.986	.001
	uplifting or positive	82		-64.7			
	varies widely in emotional tone	43		-103.7			
	Total	440					

Result in Table 1, reveals a significant deviation from expected frequencies ($\chi^2[2, N = 440] = 294.99$, $p < .001$). The results reveal that respondents predominantly perceived music recommended during sad or distressing moments as melancholic or sad (Observed N = 315), which is significantly higher than the expected frequency (146.7). Conversely, frequencies for music perceived as uplifting or positive (Observed N = 82) and music with varied emotional tones (Observed N = 43) were far below expected frequencies. These results indicate that music recommendation algorithms tend to suggest content that align with respondents' emotional states, particularly during period of sadness or distress, supporting Hypothesis 1.

Table 2: Chi-Square Test for Perceptions of Music Characteristics during Sad or Distressing Moments

		How often do you express your feelings of sadness or distress (e.g., talking to someone, writing, posting on social media)?								
		Rarely or never	**< once a week**	**Once a week**	**Several times a week**	**Daily**	**Total**	**df**	**χ^2**	**p**
How long does each exposure to personalize content last	Less than a week	11	7	7	7	0	32	12	69.70	.001
	1-2 weeks	7	11	10	10	3	41			
	2-4 weeks	7	20	78	45	9	159			
	More than a month	14	16	68	85	25	208			
	Total	39	54	163	147	37	440			

Result from Table 2 shows a statistically significant association ($p < .001$) between the duration of exposure to personalized content and the frequency of experiencing sadness or distress. Longer exposures were linked to higher reports of emotional distress. These findings support Hypothesis 2, which states that extended exposure to personalized content is associated with greater sadness or distress among users.

Table 3: Chi-Square Analysis of Exposure to Personalized Content and Frequency of Expressing Feelings of Sadness or Distress

	How often do you express your feelings of sadness or distress (e.g., talking to someone, writing, posting on social media)?				**Total**	**df**	**χ^2**	**p**
	Rarely or never	**< once**	**Once a week**	**Several times a week**	**Daily**				

			a week							
How often does your social media expose you to personalized content (including music recommendations)?	I do not engage these features	6	4	5	3	0	18	16	64.61	.001
	once in every 8 scrolls	5	10	13	7	2	37			
	Once in 4-5 scrolls	8	19	63	28	6	124			
	Once every 2-3 scrolls	7	15	57	71	16	166			
	Every time I scroll	13	6	25	38	13	95			
	Total	39	54	163	147	37	440			

Results in Table 3 reveals a statistically significant association ($\chi^2[16, N = 440] = 64.61$, $p < .001$), suggesting a strong relationship between how often participants are exposed to personalized social media content and how often they report feeling sad or distressed. The results indicate that the more frequently personalized content appears, the more often sadness or distress is expressed. This supports Hypothesis 3, confirming that a significant association exists between these variables.

Overall, the results indicate that algorithmic personalization does not merely mirror users' moods but actively shapes them. Significant patterns were observed across all three hypotheses (H1–H3), suggesting that algorithmically suggested content aligns with users' emotional states, particularly sadness or distress. This confirmation of mood-congruent information processing aligns with previous findings (Beevers & Carver, 2003; Compton, 2000; Koster et al., 2010), showing that what begins as a cognitive bias becomes a technologically reinforced emotional loop.

Unlike conventional media, algorithmic systems are driven by engagement optimization—the side effect of which is the rewarding of content that maximizes user attention, regardless of emotional cost. As a result, when users interact with emotionally charged content (e.g., melancholic music or sad social media posts), the algorithm interprets these interactions as preferences rather than temporary emotional needs. Over time, users become less emotionally flexible (i.e., experience affective inertia; Watkins, 2002; Fokker et al., 2021) because negative emotions are not disrupted by regulatory interruption.

DISCUSSION

The prolonged emotional reinforcement observed in Hypotheses 2 and 3 may be further explained through the framework of emotional reinforcement learning. Algorithms act as affective mirrors that learn from users' interactions, demonstrating a form of sadness learning through repeated engagement

signals. The clicks, replays, likes, and comments can be seen as micro-confirmations of emotional states, conditioning the system to enhance certain emotional tones. This process makes users less active regulators of their moods, turning them into subjects of automatic affective reactions within algorithmic systems. This contributes to the construct of algorithmic insecurity—a technologically mediated loss of emotional autonomy caused by commercially driven computational logic.

In Nigeria, this phenomenon carries additional psychological and sociocultural significance. The increasing level of digital activity among young people is linked to overall socio-economic anxiety and collective emotional stress (Ede & Nwokola, 2022). In collectivistic cultures, where emotional sharing and social mirroring serve as frequent coping strategies, algorithms that amplify collective negativity may heighten shared suffering and reduce perceived optimism. Social media—often a source of social validation—thus becomes a channel for emotional contagion, as users internalize collective hopelessness (Lin et al., 2020). This results in networked emotional vulnerability, where personal sadness reverberates through algorithmic spaces and returns as social instability.

However, emotional insecurity online is not solely algorithmic; user agency also serves as a moderator. Many users lack digital literacy or emotional awareness, and some cannot disrupt algorithmic patterns. Users who do not understand how algorithms operate may misinterpret mood-congruent recommendations as natural social responses rather than manipulative design, reinforcing emotional dependence on validation. Conversely, users who actively diversify their media exposure and seek positive or neutral content can buffer the emotional effects of algorithmic systems. Thus, algorithmic insecurity is not merely a technological outcome but also a psychological vulnerability shaped by human behavior within digital environments.

From a societal perspective, the accumulation of individual emotional vulnerability may represent a psychological dimension of national insecurity. Collective emotional dysregulation amplifies sadness and despair, particularly when perpetuated through digital platforms, thereby undermining civic trust, empathy, and resilience (Bar-Tal, 2001; De Coning, 2023). In societies already burdened by physical insecurity—such as Nigeria—the emotional tone of the digital environment becomes an added factor in social unrest.

Nevertheless, personalization technology is not inherently detrimental. Machine learning can also be harnessed to promote emotional recovery if algorithms are designed to detect distress and introduce emotionally corrective diversity. Evidence suggests that users may find comfort and validation in personalized playlists or supportive online communities. However, such benefits depend on what may be termed algorithmic empathy—the capacity of digital systems to distinguish between engagement and need. Without this moral sensitivity, personalization is more likely to become a form of emotional exploitation rather than support.

Although the research presents strong evidence of algorithmic reinforcement of mood, a few methodological weaknesses are worth noting. Given the study's cross-sectional nature, it is impossible to infer causality, and self-reported data might not reflect the actual behavior of recommendation systems. Perception-based measures used to assess emotional states and algorithmic exposure, while valid, may include subjective bias. For broader applicability, future studies should

incorporate digital trace data in longitudinal or experimental designs to observe real-time algorithmic behavior and mood fluctuations in dynamic contexts.

SUMMARY

In summary, this study met its objectives by demonstrating that algorithmic recommendation systems echo users' moods, and prolonged exposure to these personalized recommendations—especially during periods of emotional distress—can lead to decreased emotional stability. The results also show that social media exposure predicts greater expressions of sadness.

Beyond confirming this association, the findings shed light on the mechanisms through which these effects occur, namely emotional reinforcement, cognitive inertia, and culturally colored patterns of sharing digital emotions. Together, these processes constitute the construct of algorithmic insecurity—an emotional vulnerability that arises when humans interact with machine-coordinated personalization.

This research contributes to the ever-growing body of literature on how digital systems subtly threaten emotional well-being. It demonstrates that insecurity in Nigeria is not confined to physical or economic forms but extends to the psychological dimension. The amplification of sadness and anxiety through algorithmic systems occurs at the expense of emotional stability, affecting both individual welfare and collective social resilience.

Digital mental health, therefore, should be recognized as part of emotional security. Addressing it requires increased awareness, digital literacy, and mindful management of algorithmic exposure.

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