

From *Habbo Hotel* to TikTok: Navigating Through Complexities of Online Identity and Struggles of Belonging.

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Abstract

In this reflective piece, I explore my experience with different social media platforms and how they have shaped my identity as a first-generation Afghan immigrant in Finland. Using autoethnographic methods, I draw from personal memories and experiences to examine how each platform has influenced my online identity and aided me in navigating the intricacies of online behaviour. Through this intimate exploration, I question the relationship between algorithmic identity and personal identity, offering a personal perspective on the impact of social media in the lives of individuals with close relationships to online platforms.

Keywords: Online identity, social media, algorithms, belonging, ethnicity

Introduction

As a first-generation Afghan immigrant in Finland, I have always been conscious of the complexity of identity. As a result, my identity has frequently been a topic of discussion in my research. Throughout my life, social media and digital platforms have played a significant role in learning about myself, learning to belong, and negotiating what it means to be of both Afghan and Finnish heritage. Over the past couple of years, I have engaged with the TikTok Ethnography Collective, and my own personal anthropological research, to explore my complex and iterative engagement with social media algorithms - in particular TikTok and Instagram.

Early Beginnings

Growing up, the online world had a significant role in my life. One of my earliest online experiences was with *Habbo Hotel*, a massive online virtual world and chatroom. Around 2007-2008, I joined *Habbo Hotel*, which was primarily designed for children and teenagers, offering them a safe and playful online environment. In *Habbo Hotel*, users could create virtual avatars and interact with others while maintaining a degree of anonymity. This platform allowed young people to engage in various activities such as creating schools, shops, and other mundane tasks, essentially shaping their digital identity, and facilitating social interactions. *Habbo Hotel*'s popularity in Finland and other Nordic countries was a testament to its pioneering status as a virtual world that offered children and teenagers a safe and playful online environment.

Despite the anonymity of the platform, *Habbo Hotel* provided a sense of community and belonging that I couldn't always find offline. My online friends and I pretended to live in a virtual world, where we created schools, shops, and other mundane activities. *Habbo Hotel* was more than just a game; it was a digital community that provided a space for young people to socialise and express themselves. In many ways, my experiences on *Habbo Hotel* set the stage for my later interactions on social media platforms, where I continued to explore my digital identity and learn to navigate the complexities of online behaviour.

After playing *Habbo Hotel*, I became interested in other online games as I grew older. Around 2009, I joined *GoSupermodel*, which featured female avatars and popular public chat forums. I created two accounts: one for my school friends and the other where I was completely anonymous. My anonymous account was more popular, and I managed to be part of communities and groups that were not always available to me in my day-to-day life. A few years later when *GoSupermodel* lost its popularity, I joined Facebook. Unfortunately, I found it less enjoyable as it merged my family and friends into one space. Instead, I preferred using Tumblr and Twitter,

where I could remain anonymous. As these platforms evolved, so did my preferences. For example, when I got my first smartphone, Instagram and Snapchat were the most popular apps to download, and of course, I had to be on them.

When it came to Snapchat and Instagram, I found myself wanting to divide these platforms and use them separately by using Instagram for family and Snapchat for friends. However, when I started high school, I had to add my new friends on Instagram to keep up with 'teenage drama'. But I also created a 'finsta' account for my closest friends where I shared silly pictures of myself and memes that I couldn't share with everyone. Surprisingly, many of my friends and I were able to pick up these skills for navigating our daily problems as teens on digital platforms very fast. As I look back on my digital journey, I realise that the skills I developed navigating the intricacies of online communication have become second nature to me. With each new platform I joined, I felt a sense of excitement and anticipation, eager to explore new frontiers and discover new aspects of myself. In many ways, each of these platforms have had a significant role in some stage of my life.

I've realised that each era of my life has been closely intertwined with specific digital platforms. As I entered my early twenties, which I consider my "adulthood" stage, TikTok and Instagram became the primary platforms of my digital existence. When I initially started using TikTok, I was amazed by the way the algorithm knew exactly what I liked and would show me niche content that form different parts of my identity. This algorithm felt like an intimate relationship (Rodgers, Lloyd-Evans, 2021) and TikTok felt like a private space, because the only person who would see these videos, in that order, was me and no one else. TikTok felt more private and personal because even when you do follow people or even your own friends, you very rarely see content from the people you follow. Instead, the algorithm decides what you will see and when. As opposed to Instagram, which to me feels less personal, because the posts that you mostly see are according to which accounts you engage with. However, while I felt like the TikTok algorithm understood my personality extremely well, one aspect of my identity was missing: my Afghan ethnicity.

In contrast to my TikTok experience, my Instagram's 'explore page'¹ would almost always show me posts related to my Afghan ethnicity. Despite the fact that both platforms collect extensive data about their users, the differences in how their algorithms work have led to different outcomes in terms of identity recognition. I could not help but wonder, why was there such a discrepancy and why would I not be recognised the same way by these two platforms? The disparity between these two platforms was a huge reflection on my day-to-day questions of identity, in terms of nationality. Was the TikTok algorithm telling me I'm not Afghan enough? And even though Instagram showed me Afghan posts, was that only because I was engaging with my Afghan family and relatives' accounts?

We have all heard about the complex ways social media platforms use intricate algorithms to sort, categorise, and promote content based on users' perceived identities. This can be referred to as algorithmic identity or algorithmic imaginary (Bucher, 2015). The concept is particularly relevant for individuals, like myself, who use multiple social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram. However, it is worth clarifying that algorithms are of course not neutral or objective, but rather reflect the biases and assumptions of the people who design them (Gillespie, 2018), they are after all designed by humans first. Challenges related to gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity are not limited to real life but also exist in the online world when trying to understand one's identity and navigate through its various aspects. For example, an algorithm designed to identify and promote fitness-related content may use certain keywords or phrases to categorise users as 'fitness enthusiasts'. Similarly, an algorithm designed to identify and suppress hate speech may use certain keywords or phrases to identify users as 'hate speech offenders'. This algorithmic recognition of identity can impact the types of content, advertising, and recommendations that users receive on each platform, based on their usage patterns and the perceived aspects of their identity (Gillespie, 2018).

Keeping Separate

As I was learning about algorithms and reflecting on the lack of Afghan content on my personal TikTok algorithm, I created two separate new accounts to have an 'Afghan algorithm' and a 'Finnish algorithm' and

¹ The Explore page is a feature within the Instagram app that uses algorithms and user behaviour data to suggest personalised content to each user. The Explore page is separate from the user's main feed, which is called the News Feed. The News Feed displays posts from accounts that the user follows, as well as sponsored posts and posts that the algorithm determines the user will be interested in based on their interactions and behaviour on the platform.

compared them to see how they differ. By creating separate accounts for different aspects of my identity, I realised that algorithms were categorising and filtering content in ways that reinforced those categories.

For instance, when I interacted with content related to Afghanistan on my 'Afghan algorithm' account, initially the recommended content was often related to war, conflict, and poverty. On the other hand, on my 'Finnish algorithm' account, the recommended content tended to be more positive and focused on lifestyle and leisure activities. For me, this experience highlighted how algorithms can perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce biases based on our online behaviour.

Other than understanding algorithmic identity, looking back at my past and present online behaviour through this research, I have come to learn patterns and similarities in my online behaviour. For instance, this reflection highlighted my need to always, unintentionally, keep my Afghan identity separated from the rest of my online identity. Expectedly this division of my life has not been too far from my offline life either. Growing up in a diasporic community and having a sense of 'in-betweenness', in which one has to navigate between two different sets of cultural and societal communities resulting in confusion and disconnection (Brah, 2005), I always felt like I could never find a space where I fully belong in. Even when playing *Habbo Hotel* or *GoSupermodel*, I constantly had two separate accounts. In a way I was trying to divide my identity on the online platforms to reflect my offline life: my family life and school life were like two different worlds. And maybe anonymity served a great purpose in all of that? While being anonymous online, I could finally find the right balance for myself and a space that felt like I belonged in, without the outside influence of family or school.

Belonging is a difficult concept on its own. However, questions of belonging are particularly accentuated from an immigrant's perspective. It is hard to determine if one will ever feel like they fully belong in a place, whether that place is a digital space or a physical realm. Belonging is a continuous process of negotiation and invention, rather than just fitting into pre-existing categories (Appadurai, 1996). Perhaps my urge to keep things separate on online platforms is similar to the method people use to develop various identities in order to navigate different social contexts? Goffman's (1959) theory of dramaturgy states that people play various parts in different social circumstances based on the expectations and conventions of that environment. Similarly, people assume distinct identities in digital places based on the affordances and expectations of those platforms. Establishing distinct accounts for different sorts of information, such as the ones I used, can be viewed as a form of identity compartmentalisation and a method of performing different roles in various digital contexts (Boyd, 2010).

Some Final Thoughts: Ethnography as a Way to Challenge Narrow Categories

When it comes to my constant search for belonging and piecing together my identity, I am certain that it will be a lifetime journey. As Abu Lughod (2008) points out, identity is not a fixed or essential category but is rather constantly in flux and shaped by various social and cultural contexts. The digital, I imagine, will forever be part of this constant process of negotiation, influenced by various social, cultural, and historical factors that shape how we understand ourselves and others (Abu Lughod).

Abu Lughod stresses the significance of agency and the power of individuals to shape their identities by actively engaging with the social and cultural contexts surrounding them. Similarly, in the online realm, our intentional behaviour can challenge the algorithms' narrow categorisation of our identity and broaden the types of content and perspectives we are exposed to online.

Being part of the TikTok Ethnography Collective has been one way to challenge the power dynamics at play in my digital life. While algorithms play a significant role in shaping our digital identities, they do not form them in isolation. We play a part in shaping our digital identities through challenging and questioning TikTok, algorithms, and the forces that construct them. Engaging in a form of collective ethnographic practice was my way of questioning TikTok, Instagram and their algorithms. Part of this endeavour has involved collective reflection; broadening the contents and perspectives I was exposed to online; intentionally diversifying my online behaviour; and seeking out diverse voices and perspectives to counteract the potential biases inherent in the algorithms.

By investigating and recognising how my own behaviour has always separated my digital life, I have been able to connect the dots and intentionally integrate my Afghan identity into my overall online presence, both on TikTok and Instagram. I am intrigued to see what these new changes bring to my online experience and how different, if at all, my TikTok algorithm will be in a few months. Will any algorithm ever understand all the different niched

parts of my identity? Or will it always go hand in hand with my own struggles of identity and belonging, hence never being perfect?

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