The Power of Algorithm: How Algorithmic Trust Shapes the “News Finds Me” Perception Among Gen Z

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Research Article

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Abstract

This study examines how social media use and algorithmic influence shape algorithmic trust, in turn, how algorithmic trust contributes to the formation of the News Finds Me (NFM) perception among Generation Z users. Drawing on the conceptualization of social media as an everyday information environment, this study argues that routine exposure to algorithmically curated content fosters reliance on platform systems, thereby reshaping contemporary news-conception orientations. Specifically, in this study, a cross-sectional online survey was conducted with Gen-Z college students in Türkiye (N=592), who represent the generation that will drive the digital media landscape. Data were analyzed using SPSS and AMOS, employing correlation analysis and path analysis to test the proposed research model. The finding indicates that social media use has a significant positive effect on algorithmic trust, whereas algorithmic influence has a significant negative effect on algorithmic trust. Furthermore, algorithmic trust is a strong predictor of all dimensions of NFM perception, including feeling sufficiently informed without actively seeking news, reduced motivation for purposive news consumption, and reliance on peers for news exposure. Overall, the result highlights algorithmic trust as a key psychological mechanism underpinning passive news consumption practice in an algorithmically mediated information environment. This study contributes to communication research by clarifying how trust in platform systems redistributes responsibility for staying informed in contemporary digital landscapes.

1 Introduction

Digital media environments have fundamentally reconfigured how individuals encounter, interpret, and evaluate news. In contrast to the era of mass communication, where news consumption largely depended on intentional exposure through institutionalized media channels, contemporary information flows are increasingly shaped by platform-based infrastructures that embed news into everyday social interaction (Van Dijck et al. 2018). Within algorithmically curated environments, news is no longer primarily sought; instead, it often emerges incidentally through routine social media use, blurring the boundaries between social interaction, entertainment, and public information (Hermida 2010; Fletcher and Nielsen 2018).

This transformation has prompted a growing body of research on incidental news exposure, the process by which individuals encounter news unintentionally while engaging in non-news-related activities on social media platforms (Tewksbury et al.,2001; Boczkowski et al. 2018). While incidental exposure has been shown to increase the likelihood of encountering diverse viewpoints, it also raises critical questions about users' reliance on platform systems in maintaining their information. As news becomes ambient and continuously present, the responsibility for information selection gradually shifts away

from the user toward algorithmic infrastructures that prioritize, filter, and rank content (Thorson and Wells 2016; Diakopoulos 2019).

One influential concept capturing this shift is the News Finds Me (NFM) perception, which refers to individuals' belief that they can remain sufficiently informed about public affairs without actively seeking news, as relevant information will reach them through their social networks and digital platforms. Research has consistently associated NFM perceptions with lower levels of traditional news consumption, reduced political knowledge, and increased vulnerability to misinformation (Shehata and Strömbäck 2021). However, much of the existing NFM scholarship has focused on patterns of exposure and social connectivity, while paying comparatively less attention to the algorithmic systems that increasingly govern how news is disseminated and encountered.

Recent developments in communication and platform studies suggest that algorithms should not be treated merely as neutral technical intermediaries, but as socio-technical actors that actively shape users' informational environments (Gillespie 2014; Bucher 2018). Social media algorithms rely on machine learning techniques to infer user preferences, optimize engagement, and personalize content streams at scale (Ashuri et al. 2026). Through repeated interaction with these systems, users develop expectations about how platforms "work," often internalizing algorithmic logic as a reliable mechanism for sorting relevant from irrelevant information (Eslami et al. 2015; Shin 2020). This process gives rise to algorithmic trust, a form of trust grounded not in interpersonal relationships, but in perceived system competence, consistency, and functional reliability (Lee and See 2004; Shin and Park 2019).

Algorithmic trust plays a critical role in contemporary news consumption, as it conditions users' willingness to delegate informational agency to automated systems. When users trust platform algorithms to deliver timely and relevant content, they are more likely to reduce active monitoring behaviors and accept algorithmic curation as an efficient substitute for purposive news seeking. Emerging studies indicate that heightened algorithmic trust is associated with greater acceptance of automated decision-making, increased compliance with algorithmic recommendations, and reduced critical scrutiny of curated content (Shin et al. 2024; Logg et al. 2019). Yet, despite its growing relevance, algorithmic trust has rarely been positioned as a central explanatory mechanism within the NFM framework.

Moreover, users' perceptions of algorithmic influence, that is, their awareness of the extent to which algorithms shape content visibility and prioritization, introduce further complexity into this relationship. While early normative debates often assumed that awareness of algorithmic intervention would foster skepticism or resistance, recent empirical findings suggest a more ambivalent pattern. In some contexts, perceived

algorithmic influence may enhance trust by signaling efficiency, personalization, and reduced cognitive effort, rather than manipulation (Shin 2020; De Haan et al. 2022). This tension highlights the need to empirically examine how social media use and perceived algorithmic influence jointly contribute to the formation of algorithmic trust, and how such trust subsequently shapes users' news orientations.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to extend NFM scholarship by explicitly situating the construct within algorithmically mediated information environments and focusing on Generation Z, a cohort for whom social media platforms constitute a primary gateway to news and public information (Mitchell et al. 2016). This study investigates two central research questions: (1) How do social media use and algorithmic influence jointly shape algorithmic trust, and (2) How does algorithmic trust shape the news finds me perception? By foregrounding algorithmic trust as a psychological orientation that legitimizes passive news consumption, this study offers a finer-grained perspective on how platform systems redistribute responsibility for staying informed in contemporary digital media landscapes.

2 Social Media Use as an Everyday Information Environment

Social media platforms have moved beyond their role as mere networks for personal information, transforming into a primary information environment that shapes the individual's daily life (Van Dijck et al. 2018). While accessing information required deliberate effort in the traditional media era, news has today acquired an "ambient" nature that appears to users through routine social media use (Franzosi 2021). This concept, described as "Ambient Journalism" by Hermida (2010), highlights that news is pervasive and constantly available within the social media environment.

One significant factor in the integration of social media into the information environment is the concept of "incidental news exposure" (Tewksbury et al. 2001). Even if users do not access the platform to obtain news, they encounter algorithm-generated content. When this condition is associated with social media becoming an essential part of daily life, it has fundamentally changed how users acquire information. That is why information is no longer something that is actively sought (Fletcher and Nielsen 2018); instead, it has evolved into a resource consumed as a natural consequence of social interaction.

This constant and extensive use fosters a sense of reliance and familiarity between the user and the platform, beyond a simple technical connection (Plantin et al. 2018). Users are increasingly delegating the task of determining which information is "relevant" or "accurate" to the platform's algorithmic systems (Thorson and Wells 2016; Martens et al. 2023). At this point, the central role of social media as an information environment

establishes the foundation of the user's reliance on the systems known as algorithms, which manage this environment. Therefore, as social media use increases, trust in the validity of information and in the system's logic is expected to evolve accordingly.

Numerous studies in the literature have shown how social media has reshaped conventional news consumption behaviors. For instance, Mitchell et al. (2016) found that a substantial portion of users now prefer social media feeds to television or newspaper channels for news consumption. This transition has changed not only how information is consumed but also its reliability and its perception. The study by Westerman et al. (2014) shows that users perceive the timeliness of social media information as a signal of trust. Consequently, using social media as an everyday information environment fosters a mental acquaintance with the data provided by these platforms.

Beyond mere frequency of use, this mental acquaintance often shows itself as routine behavior characterized by automaticity. When social media use becomes routine, it is often accompanied by reduced critical thinking and minimal intentional focus. In this state of reduced cognitive effort, users are more likely to accept incidental news encounters without critical evaluation, thereby increasing their reliance on algorithmic curation. To explore the conceptual validity of this connection, a hypothesis is forwarded below.

H1

Social media use has a significant positive effect on algorithmic trust

Experiencing Algorithmic Influence on Social Media

The rapid transformation of social media has fundamentally redefined how users obtain and process information, engage, and make choices on platforms powered by algorithms that play a key role in influencing public opinion and shaping perceptions of the news (Zafar and Saleem 2025). Algorithmic influence reshapes news production by realigning editorial gatekeeping toward "share-worthiness" instead of traditional newsworthiness. Social media algorithms prioritize content that drives shares, likes, and comments, so stories with high emotional or viral potential receive greater visibility (Hastuti et al. 2025). One of the most significant developments in research on social media effects on news perception is the increasing acknowledgment of algorithmic curation. The concept of algorithmic news perception emphasizes the simultaneous role of social media algorithms in shaping how they engage with news content and the resulting impact on news formation.

Social media algorithms employ machine learning techniques to infer predictive patterns from large-scale datasets. They have increasingly become key shapers of our digital social ecosystems. These systems not only affect what we see and hear but also shape how we

act and what we believe. Algorithms are not simply passive mechanisms; they are agents with constitutive power that actively shape the news and media environments. These systems actively construct our social environment by deciding what appears at the top of our feeds, whom we might connect with, and what content should be moderated or removed.

Recent studies in the field show that algorithmic influence not only changes how users consume news but also fosters a specific sense of “algorithmic trust” in these systems. Research on the “News Finds Me” (NFM) perception, in particular, highlights that the belief that news will passively reach the user promotes more positive attitudes toward the algorithmic editorial process (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2022; Shin 2020; Lee 2020; Tuomi et al. 2024). In this context, algorithmic influence is not just a content-filtering tool; it also acts to improve “algorithmic efficiency” by reducing the user’s cognitive effort, which increases reliance on the system (Lu, 2021). Additionally, recent research (Diakopoulos and Koliska 2017; Shin et al. 2020) suggests that as users become more aware of algorithmic logic and perceive a strong match between content and their interests, their trust in and compliance with the system’s decision-making increases. As a result, the central role an algorithm plays in an individual’s digital environment directly influences the system’s ability to build trust through perceived transparency and usefulness. To explore the limited literature on algorithmic influence and trust, a hypothesis is proposed below.

H2

Algorithmic influence has a significant positive effect on algorithmic trust

3 The Formation of Algorithmic Trust

The formation of algorithmic trust is a multi-dimensional process rooted in the interaction between human cognition and machine logic (Kizilcec 2016). Unlike interpersonal trust, algorithmic trust arises from the perceived reliability and accuracy of the system's personalization. As users engage with social media platforms, they develop mental models to decode the underlying logic of their feeds (Lee 2018). The accuracy-transparency trade-off heavily influences this formation; when an algorithm consistently delivers content that aligns with a user’s predispositions, a sense of functional intimacy is established.

Furthermore, the transition from algorithmic awareness to algorithmic trust occurs when users perceive the system not as a manipulative “black box” but as a personalized curator that optimizes their information environment (Reviglio and Agosti 2020). This evolutionary process suggests that trust is not static; it is continuously renegotiated with every like, share, and scroll, ultimately leading to a state in which the user delegates their editorial agency to the algorithm.

In this context, strengthening algorithmic trust can play a pivotal role in reinforcing the News Finds Me perception. As individuals increasingly trust platforms to curate relevant and timely information on their behalf, they become less inclined to actively seek out news content (Reisdorf and Blank 2021). Instead, reliance on algorithmically filtered feeds fosters the belief that important news will reach them incidentally rather than through deliberate effort. This delegation of editorial agency to algorithmic systems aligns closely with the core assumptions of NFM, whereby perceived informational sufficiency replaces intentional news consumption (Snijders et al. 2023). Consequently, algorithmic trust not only facilitates passive news exposure but also normalizes a mode of news engagement in which users perceive themselves as informed, despite limited active news-seeking.

News Finds Me Perception

In the current media landscape, individuals are increasingly exposed to a multimedia platform environment that increases the likelihood of encountering news content without intentionally seeking it. Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017) conceptualized this phenomenon as the "News Finds Me" perception. This concept refers to the belief that one can remain informed about current events through online connections and social networks without the need for active news seeking. The existing literature identifies three key dimensions of News Finds Me perception. These dimensions include an epistemic component, staying informed (Song et al. 2021; Goyanes et al. 2023), whereby individuals perceive themselves as being informed without actively seeking news; an instrumental component, relying on peers for information, which reflects dependence on information obtained through social ties; and a motivational component, not seeking, characterized by reliance on incidental news exposure via friends rather than intentional news consumption.

Understanding such perceptions is important, as they may drive users away from important news topics, such as politics, and instead expose them to less critical but more entertaining information (Park and Lee 2023; Shi and Li 2025). Previous studies have primarily examined the NFM perception in political news consumption. Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017) have demonstrated that individuals who strongly endorse the NFM perception are less likely to intentionally follow political news and more likely to rely on incidental exposure through social media feeds, which, in turn, weakens systematic political learning. Song et al. (2021) have shown that NFM-oriented users tend to feel politically informed despite engaging less frequently in purposive news consumption, highlighting a discrepancy between perceived and actual political knowledge. Similarly, Shetata and Strömbäck (2021) have found that stronger NFM perceptions are associated with lower levels of political knowledge and reduced political participation, particularly among Gen Z.

However, the scale used in the literature to measure NFM covers a broader range of related concepts and information that go beyond political news consumption. For example,

Strauß et al. (2021) have shown that NFM orientations are also present in everyday news domains, where users depend on social media feeds to stay informed about a wide array of issues without intentionally engaging. Concerning risk-related and science-based topics, Mosallaei et al. (2020) found that perceptions of NFM are linked to selective attention to emotionally engaging or entertaining content, often sacrificing complex but socially important information.

Our study addresses this gap in the literature by evaluating how general NFM measures compare with specific NFM perceptions of news topics, including entertainment, sports, politics, sustainability, and climate change. Furthermore, research on NFM perception has largely been confined to the United States. This geographical focus leaves open the question of whether the NFM is a uniquely American phenomenon or a global trend prevalent across diverse cultural contexts (Strauß et al. 2021). Furthermore, this study is among the first to conceptualize algorithmic trust as a mediating mechanism in the formation of NFM perceptions, thereby clarifying the psychological process by which platform systems shape passive news orientations.

H3

Algorithmic trust has a significant positive effect on NFM-informed.

H4

Algorithmic trust has a significant positive effect on NFM not seeking.

H5

Algorithmic trust has a significant positive effect on NFM peers.

4 Proposed Conceptual Model

To illustrate the interrelationships between the theoretical constructs and the research hypotheses, a conceptual model is shown below (Fig. 1).

5 Method

We conducted a cross-sectional survey with Gen Z college students in Turkey. Participant recruitment, followed by online data collection, commenced with prior ethical approval. Before taking part, all respondents were briefed on the study’s objectives and notified that their involvement was entirely voluntary, with the freedom to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Digital informed consent was formally obtained from each participant through the survey interface. After data cleaning, the study yielded 592 valid cases. The sample’s gender distribution was 69.1% female and 30.9% male. Unless

otherwise noted, the measurement scale used to assess all variables was a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Principal component analysis was conducted to generate conceptual clusters for each variable. Each of these conceptual clusters was tested and validated for inter-item reliability using Cronbach's alpha.

Social media use was measured using 3 items adapted from the "social media use" scale by Campbell and Hawkins (2025). Sample items include: "Looking at social media is something I often do automatically," and "Checking social media is something I often do unconsciously" ($\alpha = 0.82$). Algorithmic influence was assessed by 4 items adapted from Campbell and Hawkins (2025) study. Example items are: "To recommend news to me while online" and "To prioritize certain news stories above others." ($\alpha = 0.88$). Algorithmic trust was assessed using 4 items adapted from Jian et al. (2000). Selected items are as follows: "The algorithm is reliable" and "I can trust the algorithm." ($\alpha = 0.78$). NFM informed was evaluated using 3 items adapted from Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017). Sample items include: "I can be well-informed even when I do not actively follow the news," and "I do not worry about keeping up with the news to stay informed because I know news will find me" ($\alpha = 0.80$). NFM not seeking was evaluated using 3 items adapted from Gil de Zúñiga (2017). These items include: "I do not have to actively seek news because when important public affairs happen, other people will notify me," and "Even when I do not actively seek news myself, I am up to date and informed about public affairs news." ($\alpha = 0.76$). NFM peers were measured using 3 items adapted from the "anthropomorphism" scale by Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017). Example items are: "I rely on other people to tell me what's important when news happens" and "I rely on what other people share with me for information about the news." ($\alpha = 0.85$).

Data analyses were conducted using SPSS and AMOS. In the initial stage, descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analyses were calculated for the variables using SPSS. The internal consistency of the measurement instruments was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. To test the hypothesized research model and examine the structural relationships between variables, path analysis was performed using AMOS. The maximum likelihood estimation method was employed in the analyses. Model fit was assessed using multiple fit indices, including the Chi-square/degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). The findings indicate that the proposed structural model demonstrates an acceptable level of fit.

6 Result

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for all constructs. The results show that the cluster with the highest mean corresponds to the functional factors. Specifically, NFM

informed and NFM not seeking yielded the highest mean value, followed by algorithmic influence and social media use. Algorithmic trust and NFM peers yielded moderate means.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Variables	M	SD	N
Social Media Use	3.06	1.15	592
Algorithmic Influence	3.07	1.14	592
Algorithmic Trust	2.92	1.05	592
NFM Informed	3.58	0.97	592
NFM Not Seeking	3.34	1.00	592
NFM Peers	2.75	1.03	592

Table 2 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients among the primary variables investigated in the study. The correlation results reported in Table 2 indicate that all variables were significantly correlated. Specifically, NFM peers had a strong connection with algorithmic trust, and NFM did not seek. Overall, the correlation findings indicate that the variables under study are associated in the expected directions and provide a suitable foundation for proceeding to the structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis.

Table 2
Correlations Between Key Variables

1 Social Media Use	1	2	3	4	5	6
	--					
2 Algorithmic Influence	0.17**	--				
3 Algorithmic Trust	0.34**	0.19**	--	--		
4 NFM Informed	0.34**	0.19**	0.46**			
5 NFM Not Seeking	0.31**	0.11**	0.37**	0.64**	--	
6 NFM Peers	0.35**	0.04**	0.44**	0.36**	0.50**	--
Note: * $p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$ (2-tailed)						

A path analysis was conducted to test all research hypotheses. Details are presented in Table 3. The results revealed a good model fit, $\chi 2/df = 2.33$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.96, NFI = 0.94, IFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.057. The path modeling result indicated that social media is a significant predictor of algorithmic trust. That is why H1 was supported (β =

1.07, $p < 0.001$). Turning to H2, which was supported by the results showing a negative relationship between algorithmic influence and algorithmic trust (β=-0 .24, $p < .05$). The path analysis results supported H3. In particular, algorithmic trust was a significant predictor of NFM-informed ($\beta = 1.00$, $p < 0.001$). The same is true for both H4 and H5, as the results indicated that, while algorithmic trust was a significant predictor of NFM not seeking ($\beta = 1.00$, $p < 0.001$), it was also a significant predictor of NFM peers ($\beta = 1.00$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 3
Structural Path Relationships

H	Structural Path	Stan. (β)	C.R.	P-value	Result
H1	Social Media Use→ Algorithmic Trust	1.07	6.224	***	Supported
H2	Algorithmic Influence→ Algorithmic Trust	-0.24	-2.315	.021	Supported
H3	Algorithmic Trust → NFM Informed	1.00	12.627	***	Supported
H4	Algorithmic Trust → NFM Not Seeking	1.00	12.005	***	Supported
H5	Algorithmic Trust → NFM Peers	1.00	9.956	***	Supported

7 Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the relationships among social media use, algorithmic influence, and algorithmic trust, and further investigated how such trust shapes the News Finds Me perception among Gen Z users. Overall, the findings provide robust empirical evidence for the pivotal role of algorithmic trust in shaping contemporary news consumption orientations within algorithmically mediated social environments.

First, the results demonstrate that social media use is positively associated with algorithmic trust, suggesting that routine, habitual engagement with social media platforms fosters confidence in platform systems. This finding aligns with extensive literature indicating that repeated exposure and everyday reliance on digital platforms contribute to the normalization of algorithmic decision-making within the information environment (Hutchinson 2020). As social media becomes increasingly embedded in daily practices, users appear more inclined to outsource their informational agency to platform algorithms, adopting a less critical stance toward content selection and prioritization processes. Second, algorithmic influence exhibits a significant, albeit moderate, relationship with algorithmic trust. This pattern reinforces the notion that an awareness of algorithmic intervention does not inherently trigger skepticism or distrust; rather,

algorithmic influence is increasingly perceived as a functional and normative feature of platform-mediated environments (Tuomi et al. 2024).

Most notably, the findings demonstrate that algorithmic trust is a strong predictor of all dimensions of the News Finds Me perception. Users who exhibit higher levels of trust in platform algorithms are significantly more likely to perceive themselves as sufficiently informed without actively seeking news, to report a diminished need for purposive news consumption, and to rely on news content encountered through social connections. This pattern reinforces existing NFM scholarship, suggesting that passive news orientations are sustained not merely by incidental exposure but also by users' underlying confidence in the automated systems that govern information flows (Paik 2025). The strength of the relationship between algorithmic trust and the NFM-informed dimension is particularly noteworthy. The finding aligns with prior scholarship indicating that the perception of being well-informed is increasingly contingent upon trust in information intermediaries rather than direct, purposive engagement with news content (Dörr and Hollnbuchner 2017). In this regard, algorithmic trust appears to function as a psychological mechanism that legitimizes passive news consumption practices, providing users with a sense of cognitive security despite their lack of active surveillance.

Taken together, these findings expand the "News Finds Me" scholarship by explicitly placing the concept within algorithmically mediated information environments. While earlier studies mainly focused on social media exposure and incidental encounters, this study highlights the key role of algorithmic trust as a mediating factor that encourages disengagement from deliberate news-seeking behaviors (Vilasís-Pamos et al. 2024). By emphasizing trust in platform systems, this research adds to the growing body of work exploring how algorithmic structures alter the responsibility for staying informed in today's media landscape.

8 Limitations

This research has several limitations. First, although using a Gen-Z sample was a good choice for exploring algorithmically mediated news consumption practices, studying the general Gen-Z population rather than the college student population will make the findings more generalizable. Second, the current study documents perceptions of algorithmic influence, algorithmic trust, and News Finds Me orientations at a single point in time. A more reliable approach would require a longitudinal study to generate comparable empirical evidence over time. Third, our conceptual model yielded valuable preliminary findings that help explain a complex phenomenon spanning multiple theoretical traditions. This conceptual model will need additional empirical efforts to confirm or improve its measurement reliability and validity. Furthermore, as algorithmic systems and platform infrastructures continue to evolve, future studies should incorporate

more detailed indicators of algorithmic functionality and visibility to more effectively evaluate the need for the construct of innovativeness.

Declarations

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (Meeting No: 2025/12) on 13 November 2025. The study was approved before the commencement of data collection. Data collection began on 14 November 2025 and was completed within one month. All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with relevant ethical guidelines and regulations, including the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained online through a digital consent form presented at the beginning of the Google Forms survey. Participants were required to read the consent information and actively indicate their agreement before proceeding to the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All participants were 18 years of age or older.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no competing interests

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Figures

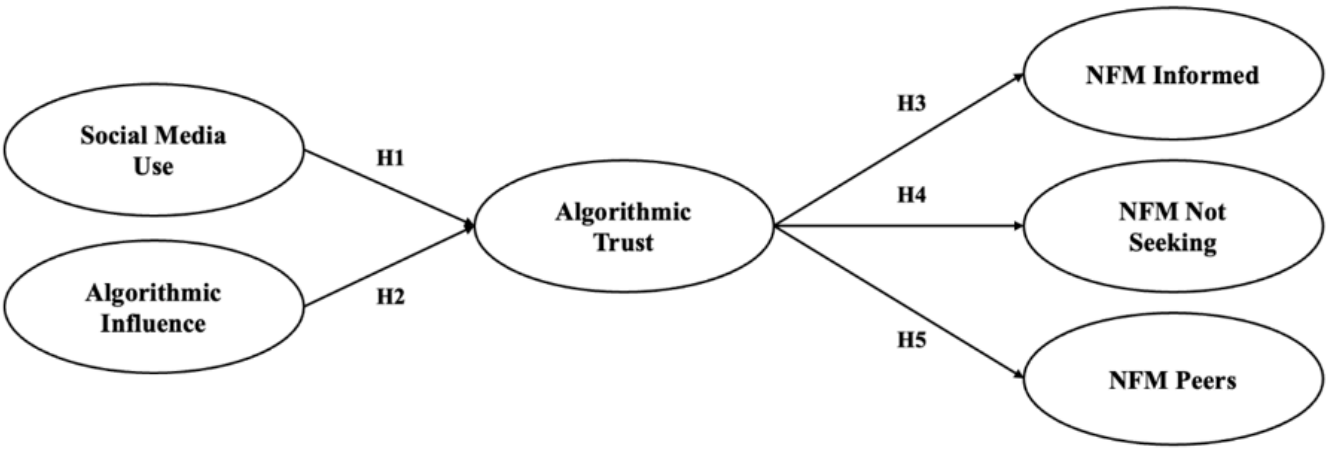

Figure 1

Proposed Model