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Nomadic https://hybrid.concordia.ca/A_FARUQ/Nomadic/

My project introduces an innovative approach to how social media algorithms distribute content to users. In the current digital era, platforms like Instagram and TikTok have risen to prominence, largely due to their sophisticated machine-learning algorithms that tailor content to individual preferences. These algorithms, drawing on various factors, excel at identifying content that aligns with users' established interests. Contrary to this model, my application seeks to venture beyond the familiar, challenging users by presenting content that diverges from their usual preferences. It offers a simple, engaging interface that allows users to navigate through videos and interact with them using one of five distinctive emojis, encouraging exploration and engagement with new and diverse content.

To gain a deeper insight into why individuals engage with platforms like TikTok and Instagram, and how their behavior, preferences, and lifestyle shape the algorithms' perception and interaction with them, I began my research. Recognizing the personal and subjective dimensions of social media usage, as well as its role as a conduit for escapism and indulgence, I opted for an informal research strategy. This approach aimed to transcend my personal biases and preconceptions, facilitating a broader understanding of the subject matter.

Employing semi-structured interviews, I engaged with participants about their social media habits. Initially, I inquired about the content of their 'explore feed' or 'for you' page on Instagram and TikTok. Among the 47 individuals interviewed, 29 could articulate their experience, while the remainder were either reticent or unable to provide substantial descriptions. Further discussions revolved around their motivations for app usage and any reservations they harbored. A common theme emerged, with many citing leisure and time-filling as their primary drivers. However, those who could initially offer detailed insights generally had more to contribute regarding their usage motivations. Notably, six participants identified stress relief and boredom as their reasons for engagement, whereas 13 sought to discover and interact with new art and music. Additionally, a significant number highlighted the platforms' role in fostering activism, enabling them to connect with global current events and social movements.

Drawing insights from the interviews and several referenced articles, I deduced the necessity of curating content libraries categorized into two predominant social media content archetypes: news (encompassing politics and current affairs) and humorous entertainment. The objective was to compile video URL libraries across these genres, featuring a range of subcategories. My vision entailed designing an interface where, through continual interaction, users' viewing patterns would direct the algorithm—crafted with conditional logic—to source videos from subcategories users were likely least acquainted with or comfortable exploring.

The development of the platform began with Node.js and React, focusing on enabling user registration and login functionalities. Unique tokens were assigned to each user and stored

in a database, allowing the system to track and analyze individual viewing habits across sessions. Despite the unforeseen time investment this component demanded, with guidance from an instructive tutorial[2] and support from Sabine, the computation lab coordinator, I succeeded in laying down the technical groundwork.

For the news content, I organized arrays of URLs categorized by the type and geographical origin of the news, acknowledging the usual practice of filtering news feeds geographically. I intended to broaden users' exposure to diverse global perspectives and realities. Given the subjective nature of what constitutes engaging entertainment, tackling this aspect alone could have spiraled into a separate research-creation endeavor. Nevertheless, a solution emerged through crowdsourcing—developing a feature that harvested YouTube URLs from popular recent posts within specific Reddit communities, thereby diversifying the entertainment content offered to users.

When integrating the bespoke login functionality with the broader system, I encountered significant challenges that ultimately led me to discard the login system I had painstakingly developed over weeks. This setback significantly dampened my enthusiasm for the project, illustrating the often unpredictable nature of research and creative endeavors. However, this hurdle inadvertently steered the project in a new, beneficial direction. It prompted me to adjust my algorithm to impact batches of 20-40 videos at a time, followed by a reset. This method assigns a score to each news content region; a higher score increases the likelihood of videos from that region being presented. User engagement, measured by the duration spent watching a

video and interactions with positive emojis, inversely affects the likelihood of similar content appearing, at least until the algorithm undergoes a reset. It's crucial to note that neither viewing duration nor emoji interactions definitively measure a user's comfort or familiarity with the content. Yet, within the constructivist and pragmatic framework guiding this project, these metrics were deemed reasonable proxies.

In conclusion, the journey of developing this project has been both challenging and enlightening, underscoring the fluid and often unpredictable nature of research and creation within the digital realm. Despite facing setbacks, such as the need to abandon the initially planned login functionality, these obstacles served as catalysts for innovation, guiding the project towards a more dynamic and interactive algorithmic approach. This endeavor not only highlights the potential of alternative content curation methods in challenging the echo chambers created by conventional social media algorithms but also opens up a discourse on the importance of exposure to diverse perspectives. As we navigate the ever-evolving landscape of digital media, projects like this underscore the critical need for platforms that foster exploration, understanding, and engagement with the myriad voices and stories that shape our world. The learnings from this project contribute to the broader conversation about the role of technology in expanding our horizons, urging us to consider how we might continue to leverage digital tools to build more inclusive and open-minded online communities.

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