Central European Management Journal

Affordances of social networking sites and imitation of interactions by Generation Z users

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Received 21 November 2024
Revised 11 March 2025
Accepted 8 July 2025

Abstract

Purpose – The article examines the relationship between the affordances of selected social media platforms and the ability to imitate interactions through herd behavior (HB) and behavioral mimicry (BM).

Design/methodology/approach – We conducted the study using the CAWI method on a group of 184 representatives of Generation Z from selected universities in Poland.

Findings – The multiple regression method served for statistical analyses. It showed that respondents, in relation to perceived content popularity (PCP), tend to imitate the interactions of other users in the form of herd behavior (Instagram, Facebook and TikTok) and behavioral mimicry (Instagram). In the same context, the perceived authority of other users (PA) influences the emergence of imitative interactions, on Instagram and TikTok (HB) and Facebook and Instagram (BM). Overall, platforms differ in their potential for imitative interactions, which we could define as habitual interactions.

Research limitations/implications – Research limitations result from the specificity of the research sample in the context of its homogeneity and size.

Practical implications – The theoretical contribution is related to developing the cognitive-emotional-behavioral theory of imitation of social media interactions through herd behavior and behavioral mimicry. We also developed the foundations for the typology of social media users' interaction imitation.

Originality/value – The novelty of the research lies in the application of affordance theory to issues related to the imitation of social media users' interactions through herd behavior and behavioral mimicry.

Keywords Generation Z, Social media platform affordances, Social media interactions, Behavioral mimicry, Herd behaviors

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) have transformed the way individuals connect, communicate, and engage with digital content. These web-based platforms allow users to create public or semipublic profiles, interact with friends, and establish new connections based on shared interests (Griffiths, Kuss, & Demetrovics, 2014). Within SNSs, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components shape interactions (Dubovi & Tabak, 2021), which manifest through online activities such as liking, sharing, and commenting (Vale & Fernandes, 2018).

A key factor influencing these interactions is the concept of affordances – the perceived, actual, or imagined properties of social media that define what users can do within a platform's environment (Ronzhyn, Cardenal, & Batlle Rubio, 2023). These affordances emerge from the

Funding: This research was conducted in the framework of the project No. WZ/WIZ-INZ/2/2023 of Bialystok University of Technology, and financed from the subsidy granted by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Poland.

Central European Management Journal
Vol. 34 No. 2, 2026
pp. 337-352
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2658-2430
p-ISSN: 2658-0845
DOI 10.1108/CEMJ-11-2024-0369

platform's features and functionalities (Sun, Zhu, & Guo, 2023), enabling users to connect, disseminate information, and actively participate in online communities without constraints of time, space, or device (Sæbø, Federici, & Braccini, 2020; Ronzhyn *et al.*, 2023).

Recent studies suggest that platform affordances play a significant role in shaping user behavior, particularly in fostering the imitation of virtual actions. Caliandro and Anselmi (2021) highlight the concept of "memetic brands," which replicate and spread digital content from user to user through platform-driven interactions. This raises an important research question: to what extent do SNS affordances facilitate the imitation of interactions, particularly when content has received a high volume of engagement or has been endorsed by users perceived as authoritative?

Although research on SNS affordances and user interactions is expanding, there remains a gap in understanding how different platforms encourage interaction imitation. Given the dual nature of imitative behavior – herd behavior and direct mimicry – we adopted the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) as its theoretical framework. This model distinguishes between two pathways of information processing: the central (cognitive) route, associated with herd behavior, and the peripheral (affective) route, linked to direct imitation.

The article contains several key sections. The literature review provides an in-depth exploration of theories related to social media interactions, focusing on behavioral mimicry and herd behavior. It also establishes the foundation for the study by formulating the research questions and hypotheses. The methodology section details the research design, participant characteristics, and data collection methods. The results section presents the key findings, followed by the discussion, which interprets these results in the context of theoretical and practical implications, particularly concerning SNS-driven behavioral mimicry and herd behavior. Moreover, this section highlights areas for future research. Finally, the conclusions summarize the study's most significant findings, acknowledge its limitations, and offer final reflections on the broader implications of the research.

Literature overview

SNS and interactions' imitation

From SNS' perspective, interactions include any form of communication (Czakon *et al.*, 2024) and may include likes, comments, direct messages, tags, and following the profile (Lauron, 2023). Each type of interaction is also an indicator of users' engagement – "willingness to invest in the undertaking of focal interactions with particular engagement objects" (Hollebeek, Conduit, & Brodie, 2016, p. 393). Li, Xu, Yamamoto, and Kee (2023) use the terms "interaction" and "engagement" synonymously. Kim and Yang (2017, p. 441) showed that individual interactions in SNSs are conditioned in several ways, where like is an affectively driven behavior, comment is a cognitively triggered behavior, and "share is either affective or cognitive or a combination of both."

In general, likes are specific one-click social cues that indicate the audience's level of interest (Bhattacharyya & Bose, 2020). Due to its emotional nature, likes (positive) and dislikes (negative) constitute qualitative information about others' reactions to social media shared content (Li *et al.*, 2023). Cognitively conditioned comments (Kim & Yang, 2017) exemplify user-generated content that is also a positive or negative reflection of the commenters' attitudes (Li, Dong, & Ren, 2024). In turn, emotionally and cognitively driven shares (Kim & Yang, 2017) are activities related to sharing information about purchases (Zhang, Li, Gu, & Luo, 2021), political preferences (Weismueller, Harrigan, Coussement, & Tessitore, 2022), or being an element of building a holistic self-image (Yang, Zhang, Liu, Hua, & Li, 2022). Interactions serve the broad purpose of building a network of relationships (Song & Xu, 2019), including para-social ones (Penttinen, 2023), social identity or self-identity (Cheng & Guo, 2015), and meeting users' specific SNS needs (Gao, Wei, Li, Wang, & Fang, 2023). On the other hand, through relational reasons, interactions can also be a factor in encouraging users to social media discontinuation (Farooq, Dahabiyeh, & Maier, 2023).

Mimicry is an individual's interaction with others through behaviors' observation and imitation (Stel & Vonk, 2010). As Darani, Mirahmad, Raoofpanah, Singh, and Groening (2023) suggest, it may be a specific type of non-verbal communication. In the context of social media, we may consider mimicry in several ways. First, Salganik, Dodds, and Watts (2006) showed that concerning shared content, users tend to imitate others' behavior by observing their activities both in the virtual space and reality. Second, it may concern the imitation and further dissemination in both real and virtual spaces of behaviors present in viral content (Yhee, Goo, Koo, & Chung, 2024). In the opinion of Harbo (2022), the tendency to imitate behaviors resulting from viral videos and their cultural evolution is related to the inherent feature of such content, i.e. being "modes of expression and public discussion" combined with their potential to spread and mutate. Third, it may be related to users' observation and direct desire to imitate the emotions and behavior of online idols, influenced by idols' direct motivation (Yani-de-Soriano, Ferreira Marques, Veludo-de-Oliveira, & Battistella-Lima, 2025). From this perspective, Song, Lin, Kwon, Choy, and Xu (2022) showed copying negative commenting patterns coming from both the source of the message (leader mimicry) and other commenters (peer mimicry).

In turn, Flores and Hilbert (2023) showed the impact of negative emotions on the level of shares without modifications (lean-back sharing) and those considering original modifications of the content (lean-forward sharing). At the same time, the cognitive element has a direct impact on the reaction and emotional context. From the perspective of linguistic mimicry and for the Q&A community, Luo, Liu, Shen, and Lai (2023) showed that the greater the popularity of the shared content, the greater the likelihood of behaviors related to imitating the linguistic style of the original message.

Noteworthy, this copying of activity may be so-called herd behaviors, when users, despite different opinions, may imitate activities and react similarly to others (Sun, 2013). The more users respond in a certain way, the greater the likelihood that additional imitators will emerge. This type of behavior is mainly short-lived and may consist of copying the virtual actions of known and unknown users (Sun, 2013), experts with specialized knowledge and experience (Keongtae & Visawanathan, 2019), and actual friends (Lee, Hosanagar, & Tan, 2015). A psychological factor plays an important role in the emergence of herd behaviors related to the dissemination of unverified information, reinforced by the information of potential threats and the uncertainty associated with it (Zhang, Cheng, Gu, & Zhang, 2024). A recent study (Kim, Dong, Choi, & Chang, 2022) suggests that negative emotions associated with shared messaging also have a significant impact on the emergence of herd behavior, particularly when preceded by negative pre-news sentiment.

Cracco, Genschow, Radkova, and Brass (2018) suggest that imitation can serve as a means to achieve positive outcomes, particularly in social contexts. The concept of this "positivity" aligns with Conte's (2000) argument that individuals are not merely passive carriers of cultural transmission but active participants in shaping the process. According to this perspective, the spread of specific actions, such as liking, sharing, or commenting, depending on the platform, is influenced by users' intentional decisions. Social norms, personal perceptions, and preferences guide these decisions.

Affordances of SNS

Affordances are properties resulting from the capabilities and characteristics of technology and how people use technology (Hutchby, 2001). From an interaction perspective, Gibson (1977) defined affordances as the ability of a system to enable users to perform specific actions. We may also view affordances as a direct human-object relationship, which, concerning IT systems, is referred to as functional affordances (Vaast, Safadi, Lapointe, & Negoita, 2017). From the SNS perspective, Zhou, Li, Scheibenzuber, and Li (2023) defined technical affordances as descriptors of how (or in what way) digital technologies are perceived and used in various social environments and as direct factors influencing the increase of user

interaction levels. In turn, Evans, Pearce, Vitak, and Treem (2017) defined affordances as features of SNSs that shape user behaviors. Based on the theory of affordances in the context of societal change, Harbo (2022) showed the key role of the perception of SNS affordances related to, among others, imitation of activities (imitation affordance) and image building (self-presentation affordance). Meanwhile, Jia *et al.* (2024) showed the influence of SNS affordances (i.e. communication, browsing others' content, and relationship formation) on the phenomenon of vicarious learning, i.e. learning by observing the behavior of others. Park *et al.* (2023) confirmed the vital role of social media platforms, affordances, and social norms from the perspective of preventing the spread of harmful social media challenges. Sun *et al.* (2023) showed that functional affordances ("action possibilities between technology and a person") of SNS are, together with symbolic expressions ("representations of communication experiences between technology and the user that guide perception and action"), one of the key factors influencing the way SNS users process and interact in the context of the shared content. According to Ronzhyn *et al.* (2023) affordances are: *relational* (i.e. specific and anchored to a specific domain, like "social media affordances"), *perceptional* (i.e. related to the specific way of their perception by individual/single actor), *contextual* (i.e. depend on a person's cultural conditions, which shape how technology is used), *action enabler and limiter*, and *discrete* (related to specific aspects of the social media platform, not to the general purpose or use of the technology). Thus, "social media affordances are the perceived actual or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms" (Ronzhyn *et al.*, 2023).

Theoretical framework

Kim (2023) emphasizes the need for further research in the context of the impact of platform-specific affordances on the level of interaction and user behavior. Therefore, we examined the impact of the affordances of SNS platforms on the possibility of imitating the activity of other users. This imitation can occur in two ways. The first one is related to behavioral mimicry without the consumption and processing of the shared content. The second one is related to the possibility of herd behavior, which, although short-lived, is conditioned by rejecting one's own beliefs (Sun, 2013) and adopting those represented by the majority. The above considerations fit directly into the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM, Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which constituted the study's theoretical framework. In this model, peripheral (affective) and central (cognitive) signals may be responsible for the development of a specific activity. Affective signals accompanying the message are processed superficially and peripherally (i.e. without direct consumption and processing of the content). From a central perspective, emerging behaviors relate to direct consumption and holistic processing of content. We assumed that behavioral mimicry relates to the peripheral route and involves the development of imitative behaviors related to generating interactions, without delving into the content (Chang, Lu, & Lin, 2020). Respectively, herd behaviors related to the central route of content processing. However, the high popularity of the content or the authority of the responders may induce the recipient to react like others. We examined the possibility of such behaviors occurring but did not analyze the reasons behind them.

Differentiation of functional affordances resulting from platform type implies simultaneous differences concerning symbolic expressions. Hence, in the current study, the diversity of affordances was defined by the diversity of the platforms – "actual or imagined properties," Ronzhyn *et al.* (2023) and related users' communication experiences – "specific uses of the (preferred) platforms" (Ronzhyn *et al.*, 2023) included in the study.

Research question and hypotheses development

In the context of information overload (Jacoby, Speller, & Kohn, 1974) and the resulting attention deficit (Menczer & Hill, 2020), can a large number of reactions, indicating users'

high level of engagement, be a predictor of the occurrence of behavior imitation related to interactions on SNS? Based on the above, the main research question (RQ) arose: From the perspective of functional affordances and related symbolic expressions associated with different SNS platforms, how does the observed important level of interaction of other users and their authority influence the emergence of interactional behavior imitation in the context of behavioral mimicry or herd behavior?

As Chang *et al.* (2020) note, users perceived the content quality through the number of reactions. Therefore, we formulated the first hypothesis related to the direct analysis of interaction levels on social media platforms:

H1. In the context of SNS, the perceived content popularity (PCP) affordances promote the imitation of interactions through behavioral mimicry (BM) or herd behavior (BM).

In this case, the interactions associated with the content can refer to imitating the behavior of others without delving into the shared content. This phenomenon is common in digital environments and depends on the influence of users we know or perceive as trustworthy (Mattke, Maier, Reis, & Weitzel, 2020). Authors showed that only "likes" from well-known users or those who are perceived as knowledgeable users (i.e. perceived as experts) can generate similar intentions to react. An interesting question is the nature of these behaviors. Is it behavioral mimicry, or is it herd behavior, or a combination of both forms? With the above in mind, we formulated the second hypothesis:

H2. The perceived authority of reacting and known users (PA) in the context of SNS affordances promotes the emergence of interaction imitation related to behavioral mimicry (BM) or herd behavior (HB). Figure 1 presents the details.

Participants and research procedure

The study participants were representatives of Generation Z. From the point of view of digital competences, we call them "digital natives" (Smith, 2017). Generation Z comprises individuals born between 1995 and 2012 (Pichler, Kohli, & Granitz, 2021). Nearly 95% of them use a smartphone every day, and it is "nearly universal among teens of different genders, ages, races and ethnicities, and economic backgrounds" (Anderson, Faveiro, & Gottfried, 2023). Despite the criticism of results emerging from college student samples (Peterson & Merunka, 2014), Lucas (2003) demonstrated its usefulness, especially in the context of research related to basic psychological processes or human behavior. The current research is strictly devoted to these aspects. The main issue in this context is the further replicability of the research, as underlined by Bello, Leung, Radebaugh, Tung, and van Witteloostuijn (2009). The target group (Table 1) consisted of bachelor's and master's students (n = 184) from

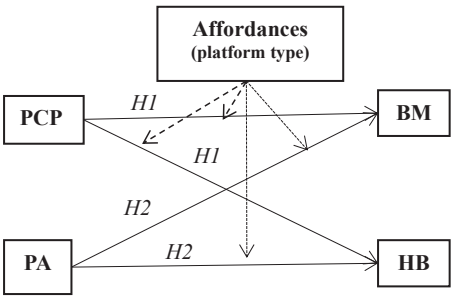

Figure 1. Theoretical framework of the study. Source: Authors' own elaboration

Table 1. Participants' characteristics

	No. of participants (F/M)	Participants' age		Platform FB (F/M)	INST (F/M)	TT (F/M)	X (F/M)	Other (F/M)
BUT	68 (32/36)	18–21	52 (76%)	1/8	16/16	12/6	1/8	2/2
		22–25	14 (21%)					
		26–29	2 (3%)					
RUT	88 (66/22)	18–21	85 (97%)	6/4	24/7	33/6	3/4	0/1
		22–25	5 (3%)					
		26–29	–					
KUE	25 (14/11)	18–21	2 (8%)	2/1	8/5	4/0	0/2	0/3
		22–25	23 (92%)					
		26–29	–					
PUE&WULS	3 (2/1)	18–21	–	1/0	1/1	–	–	–
		22–25	3 (100%)					
		26–29	–					
Total	184 (114/70)			23 (13%)	78 (42%)	57 (31%)	18 (10%)	8 (4%)

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

Białystok (BUT; $n = 68$), Rzeszów (RUT; $n = 88$), and Krakow (KUE; $n = 25$). We received single surveys from Poznań (Poznan University of Economics – UEP; $n = 2$) and Warsaw (WULS; $n = 1$). Sixty-two percent (114) of respondents were women, and 38% (70) were men. Participants used mostly Instagram (78; 42%). The next platforms were TikTok (57; 31%), Facebook (23; 13%), X (18; 10%), and "Other" (8; 4%). Table 1 presents the age structure (variable A1a) of the study sample by gender (variable S1b) and the most frequently used social media platform (variable P1c) and home university.

We identified respondents through purposive sampling (Davies, Turner, & Udell, 2024). We used the CAWI technique to collect data. The survey guaranteed full anonymity (it does not contain questions allowing any identification of respondents by name, nationality, specific age, or contact details). Therefore, we concluded that completing and returning the survey in itself constitutes consent to participate in the study (Trinity College Dublin, 2024). The research tool was a survey generated in Google Forms. We made the form available as a QR code or a direct link to the survey.

The number of received responses ($n = 184$) was significantly lower than the number of people who were given both forms of access to the questionnaire. From the point of view of respondents from PB and RUT, the number of responses represented approximately 40% of the total number of invited respondents. For KUE, it was about 20%. In turn, for PUE and WULS, this value was below 5%. The sample size was relatively small. However, prior research in the field of user experience suggests that even small samples may yield meaningful and reliable insights, particularly in contexts where users are actively involved and interacting with a system, and where experiential responses can be observed and measured (Tullis & Albert, 2013). We collected data in March and April 2024. The questionnaire consisted of two parts (Table 2):

Methods

During the initial processing of the collected data, we identified four main social media platforms used by respondents, i.e. Instagram (INST), TikTok (TT), Facebook (FB), and X (former Twitter). We grouped those indicated sporadically (including Discord, Reddit, YouTube) into a common category (Other).

Table 2. The structure of the research tool

Group of variables	Variables	Source
Demographics	– Age (A1a) – Sex (S1b) – Mostly preferred SNS platform (single choose: Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, other; P1c) City of studying (C1d)	Mattke *et al.* (2020), modified
Statements referred to the peripheral route (behavioural mimicry; BM) and central route (herd behaviours; HB) of content consumption and processing*	– Sometimes I react to shared content without reading it, in the same way that most of the reacting users did (BM) – Being active in the virtual space, sometimes I react to shared content like most reacting users, even though I have a different opinion on a given topic (HB)	Petty and Cacioppo (1986), Sun (2013), Chang *et al.* (2020), Bandura (2001), Ronzhyn *et al.* (2023)
Statements referred to the peripheral route of content consumption and processing from the perspective of the perceived content popularity (PCP) and the authority of other responders (PA)*	– If the shared content has a significant number of interactions (such as likes, comments, shares), I consider it more credible and valuable than content that has few or no reactions (PCP) – When people I know and respect leave their reactions, I react similarly, without going into the content of the entry (PA)	Petty and Cacioppo (1986), Sun (2013), Chang *et al.* (2020), Bandura (2001), Mattke *et al.* (2020), Ronzhyn *et al.* (2023)

Note(s): *Participants were to respond to the indicated statements using a 5-point Likert scale, where: "1" – strongly disagree; "2" – disagree; "3" – I do not know; "4" – agree" and "5" – strongly agree

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

We calculated basic descriptive statistics for each analyzed variable: mean and standard deviation (SD). We performed normality tests for each variable using the Shapiro-Wilk (W) test. We calculated the reliability of individual questionnaire items using the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. (George & Mallery, 2016). To demonstrate the relationship between the PCP (perceived content popularity) and PA (perceived authority)on the emergence of HB (herd behavior) and BM (behavioral mimicry) in the context of platform affordances, we performed a multiple regression analysis (Lassen, La Cour, & Vatrapu, 2017). We conducted statistical analyses using Statistica 13.3. We deposited the collected data and analyses in the Mendeley Data repository.

Results

The analysis used the results obtained from 184 respondents. Behaviors related to behavioral mimicry constituted 26% of them ("agree" and "strongly agree"). In turn, 22% of respondents declared herd behavior. A significant number of respondents were not sure how they behave from the perspective of interaction on SNS (12% in the context of HB and 14% in the context of BM – "I don't know"). The results of the Shapiro-Wilk test suggest that none of the analyzed variables had a normal distribution (Table 3). However, this does not constitute an obstacle to performing multiple regression (Kim, 2015). The values of the W statistic for individual variables ranged from 0.85 to 0.87 ($p = 0.00$). The value of Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient for the questionnaire components used was $\alpha = 0.78$.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics

Variables	Cronbach's α	$\bar{x}$	M	SD	W
BM	0.78	2.46	2	1.17	0.87
HB		2.37	2	1.12	0.85
PCP		2.46	2	1.25	0.87
PA		2.43	2	1.14	0.86

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

To demonstrate a linear relationship between the analyzed variables, we performed a non-parametric correlation analysis. We found statistically significant relationships between the variables included in the model. The value of the ρ coefficient was $0.4<|\rho|\leq 0.7$ and suggested an average relationship between the analyzed variables (Table 4).

Based on the analysis of the linear regression results obtained for the entire sample, i.e. without division into different affordances resulting from the use of different SNS platforms, we found that the popularity of the content measured by the number of observed interactions (PCP) and the perceived authority of the source of the observed interaction (PA) had a statistically significant relationship with users' imitation of these interactions from the perspective of herd behavior and behavioral mimicry. In the context of PCP, the analyzed variables explained 40% of the total variability related to interaction imitation. Again, we observed a slightly stronger effect of PCP on herd behavior ($\beta = 0.51$, Table 5).

In turn, for PA, the analyzed variables explained 24% of the overall variability associated with imitating interactions, and the standardized β coefficient values of 0.21 (BM) and 0.35 (HB), respectively, suggested the existence of a slightly stronger relationship between the perceived authority of other responders and the possibility of the emergence of herd behavior (Table 6).

The values of the Durbin-Watson statistics (PCP, d = 1.87; PA, d = 2.07) indicated the lack of correlation of residuals, i.e. the lack of autocorrelation and the statistical significance of the

Table 4. Non-parametric correlations for variables included in the model

	1	2	3	4
HB	1.00	0.54*	0.60*	0.39*
BM	0.54*	1.00	0.53*	0.47*
PCP	0.60*	0.53*	1.00	0.40*
PA	0.39*	0.47*	0.40*	1.00

Note(s): *-statistically significant; $p < 0.05$

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

Table 5. Predicting behavioral mimicry and herd behavior from the perspective of the perceived content popularity (PCP) – linear regression analysis

	B	SE	β	t	p
$R^2_{adj.} = 0.4$; $F(2,181) = 61.2$, $p < 0.00$					
Constant			0.55*	2.94	0.00
BM	0.26*	0.07	0.28*	3.87	0.00
HB	0.46*	0.07	0.51*	6.86	0.00

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

Table 6. Predicting behavioral mimicry and herd behavior from the perspective of the perceived authority of the sources of observed interactions (PA): linear regression analysis

	B	SE	β	t	p
$R^2_{adj.} = 0.24$; F(2,180) = 29.8, $p < 0.00$					
Constant			1.07*	5.55	0.00
BM	0.36*	0.08	0.21*	2.68	0.00
HB	0.20*	0.08	0.35*	4.83	0.01

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

proposed model. Regarding the impact of perceived content popularity of PCP on the occurrence of BM and HB from the perspective of the diverse affordances of the analyzed platforms, it was shown that imitating interactions in terms of herd behaviors was characteristic of Facebook. ($\beta = 0.92$*; $R^2_{adj.} = 0.44$; F(2,20) = 9.6, $p < 0.001$), Instagram ($\beta = 0.49$*; $R^2_{adj.} = 0.3$; F(2,75) = 22.3, $p < 0.00$), TikTok ($\beta = 0.54$*; $R^2_{adj.} = 0.44$; F(2,54) = 22.7, $p < 0.00$) and group of platform defined as "Other" ($\beta = 0.69$; $R^2_{adj.} = 0.89$; F(2,5) = 29.6, $p < 0.01$). However, the latter case seems to be unreliable due to the small number of respondents. In terms of behavioral mimicry, we observed statistically significant relationships for Instagram ($\beta = 0.32$*; $R^2_{adj.} = 0.36$; F(2,75) = 22.3, $p < 0.00$) and "Other" ($\beta = 0.41$; $R^2_{adj.} = 0.89$; F(2,5) = 29.6, $p < 0.04$) with similar limitations. We found support for Hypothesis H1b from the perspective of Facebook, Instagram, and TT (HB), and Instagram (BM). Figure 2 shows the detailed results.

Concerning the affordances of the analyzed SNS platforms, the obtained results of the regression analysis suggest the existence of a significant influence of the perceived authority of other responders (PA) on the appearance of imitation of behavior in terms of both BM and HB. Statistically significant relationships were demonstrated for herd behavior in the case of Instagram ($\beta = 0.25$; R^2adj. = 0.31; F(2,75) = 18.26, $p < 0.04$) and TikTok ($\beta = 0.40$; R^2adj. = 0.23; F(2,53) = 9.2, $p < 0.01$). In turn, in the case of behavioral mimicry, the influence of PA on imitating interactions occurred on Instagram ($\beta = 0.40$*; R^2adj. = 0.31; F(2,75) = 18.26, $p < 0.00$) and Facebook ($\beta = 0.68$*; R^2adj. = 0.28; F(2,20) = 5.23, $p < 0.01$). We found support for hypothesis H1a from the perspective of Instagram and TT (HB) and Facebook and Instagram (BM). Figure 3 presents the details.

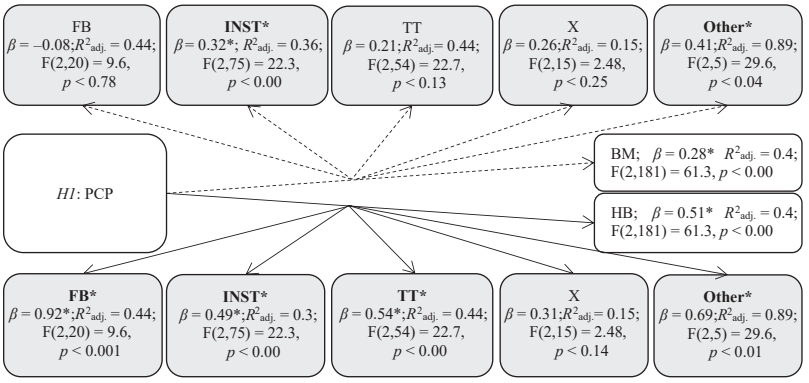

Figure 2. Predicting BM and HB from the perspective of perceived content popularity (PCP) and in the context of affordances of analyzed SNS platforms: linear regression analysis. Source: Authors' own elaboration

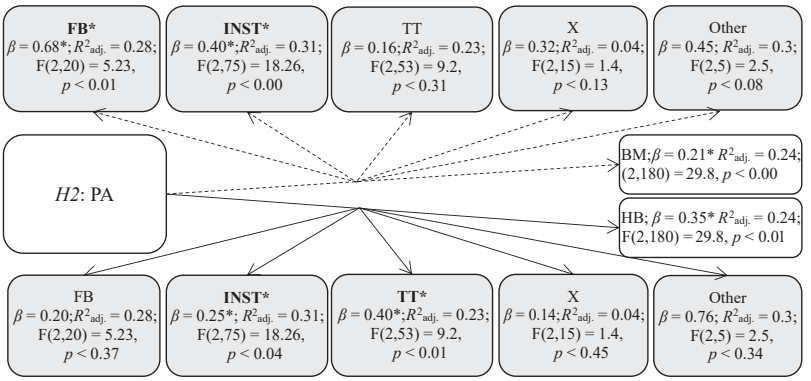

Figure 3. Predicting BM and HB from the perspective of the perceived authority of the sources of observed interactions (PA) and in the context of affordances of analyzed SNS platforms: linear regression analysis. Source: Authors' own elaboration

Discussion

We examined the relationship between the affordances of selected social media platforms and the ability to imitate interactions through herd behavior (HB) and behavioral mimicry (BM). To analyze this, we applied the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). It indicates two basic and interpenetrating routes of information processing. We assumed the first one, the peripheral route, based on superficial and affective content consumption, to be synonymous with behavioral mimicry. The second, central route is due to holistic content consumption, with the proviso that one's acting sometimes despite oneself, like other observed users, assumed to be a specific counterpart to herd behavior. Based on the obtained results, we concluded that both routes may contribute to the appearance of imitations of interactions among Generation Z users on all analyzed SNSs (HB – 22% or BM – 26%). Noteworthy, 12% in the context of HB and 14% in the case of BM cannot correctly determine the nature of their behavioral activities concerning the processing of published content. Both imitation of behavior and difficulties in determining one's reaction to shared content may result from the phenomenon of information overload resulting from too many communication episodes (Jacoby *et al.*, 1974; Karr-Wisniewski & Lu, 2010). We may also explain this phenomenon by the concept of habitual shares (HS), resulting from repeated use of social media (Ceylan, Anderson, & Wood, 2023). From the perspective of the above research results, the HS concept should extend to different types of interactions (i.e. likes, comments, and shares). In this approach, "habitual" means the effect of the interaction of specific functional affordances of platforms with the subsequent emergence of specific experiences – "symbolic expressions" (Sun *et al.*, 2023), which, combined with the information overload, carries the risk of non-critical and emotional processing of content (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018) and further mindless reaction. Thus, the current results related to the formation of HB or BM interactions can be described in general as habitual interactions (HI). The presence of platform-specific and affordances-based habitual interactions in the form of herd behavior or behavioral mimicry constitutes the study's first theoretical contribution.

From the perspective of the analyzed platforms, we also found that functional affordances (FA) combined with the user's individual communication experience with a given platform (symbolic expressions) constitute the basis for shaping behavior related to the platform. Thus, platform type and related affordances are crucial from the perspective of arising and developing imitative activities through various forms based on the authority of others or perceived content popularity, which confirmed both hypotheses. Moreover, Haupt, Cuomo, Li, Nali, and Mackey (2022) also observed differences resulting from platform affordances

concerning content source posting behavior in the context of how drug dealers advertise their services.

According to the results, individual platforms have probably different potential for generating interaction imitation. That property may be conditioned by, among others, the popularity of a given platform among a specific group of users (Gen Z in our research), i.e. the more popular the platform is, the greater the potential to imitate interactions based on previous experiences related to symbolic expressions. The dominant role of Instagram and TikTok in our research and the context of HB and BM may be because these are the main virtual environments of Generation Z. From a North American perspective, 75% and 69% of respondents use both platforms, respectively (Morning Consult, 2024). This also explains the significant contribution of both the analyzed most popular platforms to generating interactions imitation based on affordances, which are associated with platform-specific communication experiences and their functional properties. This is a second theoretical contribution confirming previous research on interactions' behavioral imitation (Sun *et al.*, 2023).

The novelty of the presented results lies in the fact that imitation of behavior may have a dual nature, related to HB and/or BM. Herd behavior is an important mechanism related to the phenomenon of thoughtless dissemination of unverified information (Pröllochs & Feuerriegel, 2023). In light of the obtained results, similar property shows behavioral mimicry, and the transition between the BM and HB in the context of interaction imitation could be described by the ELM model. Both the imitation process and aforementioned transitions are particularly interesting from the perspective of harmful (or fake) content spreading (Spínola, Calaboiça, & Carvalho, 2024), conditioned by, among others, the influence of analyzed PCP (Madrid, 2023) and/or PA (Kumar, Shankar, Behl, Arya, & Gupta, 2023).

According to social learning theory (SLT, Bandura & McClelland, 1977), indirect observation and imitation may also condition copying behaviors. In this approach, SNS users are actors driving the process of cultural transmission (Conte, 2000) by imitating interactions based on various mechanisms, and conditioned by internal and external factors, like specific social reward (Matyjek, Meliss, Dziobek, & Murayama, 2020; Smeijers, Uzieblo, Glennon, Driessen, & Brazil, 2022). In this case, we may view the interaction imitation through HB and BM as one of the mechanisms for creating specific social bonds (Laninga-Wijnen & Veenstra, 2023), including para-social ones (Penttinen, 2023) in a virtual environment.

The main practical contribution of this study is identifying the scale of occurrence of imitative behaviors. From the perspective of both herd behavior (HB) and behavioral mimicry (BM), about a quarter of respondents declare similar activity patterns. Additionally, a small percentage of participants are unsure why they engage in similar behaviors. This is particularly problematic from the perspective of disseminating content related to, i.e. fake news (Kumar *et al.*, 2023), self-destructive behavior such as Non-Suicidal Self-Injury, NSSI (Spínola *et al.*, 2024), building a false threat in the context of psychological operations (Oktavianus & Meng, 2024), and others. The above results concerning the issue of habitual interactions confirm the conclusions suggested by Figl *et al.* (2023, p. 14) regarding the need to introduce additional mechanisms to protect against "intuitive and overly quick user decisions that promote the spread of fake news."

Conclusions

The analyzed SNSs undoubtedly differ from each other in their affordances and the resulting possibilities for the emergence of user imitative behaviors. Understood as both the properties of the platform itself and the user experiences associated with them, affordances related directly to the possible emergence of behavior related to the creation of imitations of interactions, most probably have a dualistic nature: HB (herd behavior) and BM (behavioral mimicry).

Limitations of the study included two main issues. The sample size of respondents for "Other" platforms (Discord, Reddit, YouTube) was particularly small ($n = 5$), which limits the

confidence in the results reported about the platform. The relatively small sample sizes for Facebook ($n = 20$) and X ($n = 15$) also limit the results' broad generalizability. However, the high levels of statistical significance observed alleviate this problem (Haupt *et al.*, 2022). Another limitation was the small diversity of the sample, which included only respondents from Poland. However, in the era of globalization and unlimited possibilities of transferring cultural patterns, we can assume that the *digital natives* of Generation Z show several similarities in the everyday use of modern digital technologies, including social media, regardless of their place of residence (Khan, 2022; Statista, 2023).

Further research should focus on analyzing platform-specific affordances from the perspective of different groups of users and their motivations on mobile devices (i.e. entertainment, local information-seeking, salient information-seeking, and financial information-seeking; Wohn & Ahmadi, 2019), as well as social and cultural factors influencing and mediating the emergence of imitation HB (herd behavior) and BM (behavioral mimicry) activities. The issues related to the possibility of different imitative potentials of content platforms (e.g. YouTube) and strictly social interaction/relations platforms (Facebook) are important and require further empirical analysis. This is especially important in the context of the spread of fake news, harmful behavior, and misinformation dissemination.

Ethical statement

The research conducted for this article involved the participation of 184 respondents. The research tool was constructed in such a way as to prevent any individual identification of the study participants. Participation in the study was voluntary. Only the general behavior of the participants was analyzed, without the possibility of their identification in any way. Details of the research procedure are included in the manuscript.

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