

Mediating User Preference Communication in Platformized Media: A User-Centric Study of Recommender Systems in Audiovisual Environments

Abstract

Recommender systems (RS) have become a central infrastructure of audiovisual media consumption in platformized environments. They shape what users encounter, how content is made visible, and how preferences are inferred, interpreted, responded to, and acted upon. While much RS research treats user preference mainly as a technical problem of prediction and matching, this dissertation approaches it from a user-centered and communication-oriented perspective. It examines how the expression, negotiation, and enactment of user preference are mediated by RS in everyday audiovisual media use, and with what implications for user experience and platform personalization.

To address this question, the dissertation adopts a multi-method design across four complementary studies. Study 1 examines behavioral consumption patterns on the Chinese platform TapTap to explore tensions between intended preference and observable choice under platform conditions. Study 2 conducts a systematic review of research on user preference in audiovisual RS to analyze how preference has been defined, operationalized, and evaluated in the field. Study 3 investigates users' public articulations of recommendation experience through a large-scale analysis of Weibo discussions about Bilibili's RS. Study 4 draws on in-depth interviews to examine how users' everyday routines, media repertoires, and practical contexts shape their requirements for recommendation.

Across these studies, the dissertation shows that user preference is neither transparently captured through behavior nor automatically realized through recommendation. Instead, it is mediated through a partial and asymmetrical process in which preferences are expressed through limited traces and articulations, negotiated under platform-specific and commercial conditions, and only conditionally enacted in lived media use. The findings highlight recurring tensions between user needs and platform logics, between short-term behavioral signals and longer-term evaluative concerns, and between system-centered optimization and user-centered lived experience. They also show that users assess recommendation not only in terms of relevance, but also in relation to quality, autonomy, contextual fit, and responsiveness.

The dissertation contributes a communication-centered framework for understanding RS as infrastructures that mediate user preference communication between users and platforms. It also offers practical implications for more responsive and user-centered recommendation design and evaluation, especially in relation to user control, plural evaluation criteria, and the alignment between platform interests and user benefit.