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Faculty of
Communication and
Media Studies

Doctoral Dissertation

**THE CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION OF
“SPECTACULAR” SUBJECTIVITIES: A STUDY OF THE
INSTAGRAM ASSEMBLAGE**

Lydia Georgia Kollyri

Limassol, September 2022

CYPRUS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY
FACULTY OF COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION AND INTERNET STUDIES

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Abstract

Instagram has succeeded in becoming a pervasive part of everyday life for many of its million users. Although some researchers tend to overlook its significance, as noted by Abidin (2016a), we should not turn our back on things that may seem trivial or “superficial”, as the familiar is not necessarily understood (Hegel, 1807/1977). Drawing on the Debordian concept of the spectacle, the Foucauldian approach of power and principles of Actor Network Theory, this doctoral dissertation investigates the Instagram platform as a sociotechnical assemblage of heterogeneous human and non-human actors exploring the power relations articulated on it. For that purpose, three empirical studies have been conducted focusing on different entities of the Instagram assemblage, namely i) the platform’s structural elements, such as affordances and algorithms, ii) discourses on Instagram and iii) Instagram users, exploring the following master research questions: *Which is the ideal use of the Instagram platform? How does Instagram function as a norm-(re)producing mechanism and how it constructs user subjectivities? What power mechanisms does Instagram employ? How do users react to these mechanisms?*

The first study employs an *interface analysis* investigating the Instagram ideal use and inscribed subjectivities, focusing on the platform's interfaces together with the surrounding Instagram discourses. The findings show that four types of “ideal” users are prescribed. The second study focuses on the Instagram algorithms as a recommendation system exploring whether a filter bubble emerges. Applying the *algorithmic auditing method*, I have shown that Instagram algorithms render certain topics much more salient, generating a filter bubble of commercial and soft topics. Both studies’ results indicate that Instagram closely resembles a contemporary spectacle, revolving around the aestheticization of everyday life with various repercussions. Based on the results of the previous studies, in the third study, 15 in-depth interviews have been conducted with Instagram “ordinary” users to explore how they react to Instagram power mechanisms. The results show that individuals adopt different using positions, *following, negotiating, opposing* and *subverting* the system. Taking everything into account, this dissertation concludes by utilizing de Certeau’s approach regarding *place* and *space* to analyze the platforms’ ecosystem and revealing the strategies constructing the Instagram *place*, and the tactics transforming it into a *space*. In the conclusion section, the notions of *voyeur* and *walker* are brought to attention, while the notion of *transient* is introduced, contributing to the conceptualization of user agency. The findings of this doctoral research can be used to inform the design of tools that can strengthen users’ agency as well as provide directions on how users’ relationships with the platforms can meliorate.

Keywords: critical internet studies, Instagram subjectivities, Instagram algorithms, Instagram spectacle, user agency, power relations

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1 Introduction

1.1 Instagram: a “trivial”, superficial platform?

Eliza arrived at our meeting point holding a cup of hot coffee she had just bought. The interview was about to start in a while. Before the interview began and after being friends for some years, we were talking about general topics. At some point, Eliza stared at her cup with the flower design and said, “Look at this cup. It is so beautiful. If I also had my nails done, it would be perfect for an Instagram story.” During that time, Eliza had deactivated her Instagram profile for one month to “detox,” yet her thoughts kept going back to it.

It was a cup of coffee and just a thought of capturing and sharing it; why should we care about it? A trivial everyday moment tracked Eliza’s attention. The reason seemed to be Instagram, a moment that otherwise might have gone unnoticed; simultaneously, she thought of combining the cup with her polished nails. The question is, would Eliza have thought of sharing that moment if the cup was not an appealing one and she could not have her nails done? Would that moment have even stood out during her day? These questions make us consider the role of Instagram in how users experience everyday life. At the same time, could Eliza’s contradictory behavior (thinking about Instagram while trying to “detox”) indicate a hidden tension lurking beneath our relationship with the platform?

Instagram is a platform that has penetrated people’s lives, as it constitutes an everyday activity for billions of users. However, as Abidin (2016a) noted, some researchers tend to overlook the significance of Instagram, characterizing it as mere entertainment or “junk.” In order to stress this perspective, she entitled her paper “Aren’t these just young, rich women doing vain things online?” (2016a). In addition, Caldeira, Bauwel and Ridder (2021) also noticed the same tendency as self-representation practices on Instagram, especially of women, on Instagram are usually dismissed as trivial. However, I argue that we should not turn our back on things that may seem trivial or “superficial,” as the familiar is not necessarily understood (Hegel, 1807/1977). On Instagram, some users may share trivial everyday content and communicate, but the platform is much more complicated. Instagram is a commercial platform with financial incentives, consisting of data, algorithms, affordances and state-of-the-art technology that has become part of everyday life. According to Caliandro and Graham (2021, p. 1), Instagram is a platform that “indubitably, deserves rigorous academic attention,” especially as it constitutes an everyday activity for more than 1.9 billion of users (Aslam, 2022).

Instagram was released in 2010 and in 2021 counted 2 billion monthly active users worldwide, which is a tremendous increment compared to the proportion of 500.000 million in 2016 (Iqbal, 2022). Since Instagram launched, individuals have uploaded over 50 billion images and videos

(Wise, 2022). Every second, more than 1.100 photographs are uploaded and shared on the platform (Gajić, n.d), constituting a place of visual public culture (Manovich, 2017). On Instagram, users can create a profile and fill it with photographs. In addition, one can watch a flow of visual content (images or videos) and interact with it by “liking” or commenting on it. Its core is visual content and mainly images. The platform is offered to users as a tool to share photographs with their friends and followers. For that reason and because of the prominent role of images, it has been characterized as an image machine (Carah & Shaul, 2016). The platform, year after year, adds more and more features that users can use in order to produce and consume content or interact with it, such as filters, stickers, polls, live videos, stories, etc. Instagram is one of the first applications that fully exploits the relationship between people and their mobile phones (Frier, 2020), urging them to mechanically use it through the movements of point, tap, swipe and glance (Carah & Shaul, 2016). Although Instagram is sometimes seen as a platform through which users solely communicate with each other and share content, Amelia Tait (2020) characterized it, in her article on the Guardian, as “the most influential app of our generation,” commenting on the ways that Instagram has changed the world. Instagram has affected society in several ways, such as changing the celebrity and business world, aesthetics and culture (Frier, 2020; Leaver, Highfield & Abidin, 2020; Tait, 2020), the way people travel (Garner, 2020), the way restaurants and stores are designed (Leaver et al., 2020) as well as the way people perceive beauty and body (Carah & Shaul, 2016), e.g. people get filter-inspired cosmetic surgeries in order to be more alike to the Instagram-edited photograph of themselves (di Donato, 2018; Tait, 2020). Furthermore, it has established the “influencer” phenomenon and has given prominence to brands, filters and selfies. The influence of Instagram was also evident, when the government of Indonesia chose to give vaccine priority to Influencers during the break of the Covid 19 pandemic as a communication strategy (Widianto & Lamb, 2021). Although Indonesia confronted the most intense covid outbreak in Southeast Asia (Widianto & Lamb, 2021), the government decided to rely on Instagram Influencers, proving the powerful impact and influence that the platform has. At the same time, more and more Instagram accounts devoted to alternative topics, such as politics, feminism, news, and activism, are created (see Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Mahoney et al., 2016; Crowder, 2021; Savolainen et al., 2022, Cornet et al., 2017), giving prominence to alternative voices too. Although Instagram seems to be an influential platform, part of the public sphere (Çela, 2015), and has an enormous impact on individuals’ everyday lives on many levels (Caliandro & Graham, 2021), it has also been quite uncritically incorporated into people’s everyday life (Carah and Shaul, 2016).

Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms and also a place where communication and commerce overlap (Leaver et al., 2020), as the promoted content, advertisements and brands have never been distinguished from the content shared by ordinary users (Carah & Shaul, 2016). Instagram is a lucrative business that was bought by Facebook at the price of 1 billion dollars in 2012 (Leaver et al., 2020), and today it is worth 100 times more (Wise, 2022). In fact, according to Bloomberg (Frier & Grand, 2020), in 2019 Instagram

brought in 20 billion dollars in advertising revenue, which accounts for more than half of the ad revenue of Facebook that year (Wise, 2022). The platform started as a small photo-sharing app, and it had not made any profit until Mark Zuckerberg bought it (Leaver et al., 2020). In 2013 Instagram started to experiment with advertisements and in 2015 opened to businesses (Leaver et al., 2020); in 2019, it consisted of over 200 million brand accounts (Smith, 2019). Year after year, Instagram substantially raises its revenue and profits (see Wise, 2022), shaping an ideal platform for advertisers. Instagram was the most looked-for social media platform in 2021, as 89% of marketers used it for influencer marketing (Wise, 2022). According to a Facebook's survey (Facebook, n.d), 87% of the respondents said that when they see a product on Instagram, they take action and engage with the brand (following its account, visiting its website, making a purchase), while 54% stated that they had bought a product. Instagram is a most profitable business for Facebook, which was characterized as a "discovery engine for brands" that goes beyond generating awareness, as it actually drives sales (Facebook, n.d). Therefore, it is most essential for Facebook to preserve that image and profile for Instagram so as to bring revenues to the company. In order to achieve that, users should not only keep choosing Instagram but also adopting a specific use of it, following and engaging with businesses.

1.2 Defining the Problem

This doctoral dissertation aims to explore the power relations articulated on the Instagram platform, investigating the interplay between interfaces, algorithms, discourses and "ordinary" users.

Critical approaches to new media bring to attention the notions of power and resistance. Web 2.0 environment is described by power relations among non-human and human actors, such as users, algorithms, data, and discourses. A significant aspect of internet power is that it induces things to happen, exercising power without users always being aware of it. Based on Foucault (1982), power is a productive force, one that demarcates subjects' practices and behavior and directs human behavior without acting directly on them. It is more easily accepted when impose things on people, exercised over otherwise free subjects (Foucault, 1982). Web 2.0 generally is seen as a space where users are free to participate in. A platform such as Instagram can be seen as a technology that can shape and direct users' conduct and actions, without restricting or forbidding them, so as to produce desired effects, while users may feel free to take part in it.

As van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2018, p. 3) stress "platforms are neither neutral nor value-free constructs; they come with specific norms and values inscribed in their architectures." In particular, platforms enact certain subject positions and norms, bearing an ideal use of each platform (Gehl, 2014; Introna, 2016) through their structural elements, design choices, affordances, algorithms, and discourses. Actor Network Theory directs attention to the

heterogeneous relations between human and non-human actors that shape platforms and through which ideal subjectivities are constructed, determining specific actions (Latour, 1992) and shaping users' behavior (Beer, 2009; Bucher, 2012; Gillespie, 2014; Grosser, 2014; Pasquale, 2015). Thus, Actor Network Theory puts emphasis on the question of who and what is participating in the action and how, as things may “authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on” (Latour, 2005, p. 72). This drives us to the notion of affordances which are strongly connected with the notion of power, as through them human actions can be directed (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Latour (2005) also stresses the role of both material and social elements, driving us to the assemblage way of thinking. Assemblage theory is a necessary method to study technology (Acuto & Curtis, 2014; Kitchin, 2014), highlighting the relations among different entities that construct a network (Bousquet, 2014). This approach stresses that in order to investigate the relation between human and non-human actors, we should also focus on the ideologies, discourses and other elements (Acuto & Curtis, 2014) as well, as they can “afford social power” (Beer, 2017, p. 8). In the case of Instagram, one of the most popular social media platforms, it is worth questioning how it functions as a norm-(re)productive mechanism and who is the ideal user of it, especially bearing in mind that Instagram is a commercial platform.

The commercial nature of Instagram raises even more concerns regarding the subjectivities it constructs, the impact on users' identity, and the way it may influence their behavior. As a commercial platform, Instagram aims to raise its profits and attract more and more businesses, and in order to accomplish that, users should follow a behavior conducive to market, advertising, and brands. In fact, there are indications that some users adopt a specific pattern of behavior on Instagram, producing images that are promotional in a gentle and persistent manner in order to gain reputation and attention (Abidin, 2016b; Carah & Shaul, 2016). Instagram is a platform into which reputation economy and self-branding practices have been embedded, as reputation is visible, tangible, and measurable (see Gandini, 2016a; Hearn, 2010). Although there are some indications that the platform may influence users, Instagram has not been sufficiently inquired regarding which actions and norms it reinforces through its structural elements, potentially affecting users' behavior. The intensive use of the platform, its financial motivation, reputation economy, the blending of users and brands, as well as the indications of the platform's effects on users and society, intensify the need to focus on and investigate the implications of Instagram use on users' subjectivities.

Critical approaches have pointed out how, working through the “technological unconscious” (Thrift, 2005) and a “post-hegemonic” mode of power (Lash, 2007), algorithms engineer certain forms of sociality and shape users' behavior (Beer, 2009; Bucher, 2012; Gillespie, 2014; Grosser, 2014; Pasquale, 2015). In 2016, Instagram introduced a new personalization algorithm, mentioning that users would be recommended content that interests them the most. However, personalization algorithms have raised concerns regarding their implications on

democracy, polarization, and stereotyping behavior (Cheney-Lippold, 2011). Despite being often framed as neutral information mediators, critical approaches argue that users can be isolated in “filter bubbles” with severe repercussions (Just & Latzer, 2017; Pariser, 2011). Bearing in mind the platform’s commerciality as well as the abundance of Instagram commercial accounts that leverage its algorithms in order to promote their content and gain visibility (see Cotter, 2019; O’ Meara, 2019), questions are raised regarding the emergence of filter bubbles that may privilege commercial topics and represent a reality where capitalist values dominates. Thus, it is crucial to investigate the content Instagram algorithms recommend and whether they foster diversity, especially since Instagram is seen as a place of visual public culture (see Manovich, 2017). According to Bucher (2018, p. 3), “we need to be attentive to the way in which some realities are always strengthened while others are weakened.” In addition, although in the case of Instagram the studies focusing on personalization are limited, there are indications that Instagram algorithms may affect users’ and content’s visibility (Carah & Shaul, 2016; Quick, 2021; Cotter, 2019) and, thus, they should be investigated in depth.

Although platforms can enact subjectivities and produce norms, this does not mean that users adopt them since they can react and resist, developing tactics and practices against the domination of power (de Certeau, 1984). Thus, de Certeau’s approach to the investigation of power relations is vital since users are not perceived as passive. In particular, de Certeau (1984) claimed that users are not passive consumers of content, but they sometimes resist invisibly without rejecting the system. As van Dijck et al. (2018, p. 11) contend:

Technological and economic elements of platforms steer user interaction but simultaneously shape social norms. Although a platform’s architecture affords a particular usage and users are often met with a finite set of possible options, they are not “puppets” of the techno-commercial dynamics inscribed in a platform.

In fact, studies have shown that users can resist and influence algorithms (Bucher, 2017; Cotter, 2019; O’ Meara, 2019), can exploit the platforms for their own purposes (Abidin, 2016a, 2016b), feel empowered (see Caldeira et al., 2021; Olszanowski, 2014) and negotiate prescribed affordances of social media (Costa, 2018) (see Section 2.4 for more details). Therefore, in order to understand and investigate power relations, we should explore individuals’ perspectives with particular emphasis on “ordinary” users (Kennedy, 2016; Caldeira et al., 2021), as user agency is sometimes overlooked (Costa, 2018).

1.3 The scope of the dissertation

The present PhD dissertation is positioned in the field of critical internet studies which constitute an interdisciplinary field, bringing together scholars from social sciences, humanities, computer science and other fields, with the common aim of tackling questions about the operation and effects of the internet assemblage on users' lives and contemporary society. Critical internet studies originate from the combination of internet studies, which is the study of the internet and its complicated assemblage of people, institution, interfaces, algorithms, software and technologies, and critical research, deriving from many research traditions (Hunsinger, 2019). The field was created in relation to other existing areas, such as critical media studies and critical technology studies. However, it has become distinct from them as it has specific particularities and objectives. Firstly,

critical internet studies must engage on some level with the material realities of the internet such as its software and hardware and those owning and regulating it. If it does not deal with these topics, it is hardly dealing with the internet. It should also consider and perhaps reveal the role these materialities play in our society. Not all research needs to address all of it, but if it discusses none of it, then it is not critical internet studies (Hunsinger, 2019, p. 10).

Therefore, the materiality of web 2.0 and its objects lie at the core of the field. Software studies is another related field in the domain of internet studies, which also highlights the crucial role of software and objects in the research of contemporary society and culture. Manovich (2001) has argued that in order to understand new media we need to turn to computer sciences and focus on the objects, shifting from media studies to software studies. Nowadays, software can be seen as an object of study in its own right beyond mere mathematics, software engineering and computer sciences (Fuller 2008). Secondly, according to Hunsinger, critical internet studies should equally engage with discourse and ideologies, as “what people believe about the internet dramatically influences how they use it” (2019, p. 10). In the contemporary new media landscape, the platform, which lies at the core of the proposed research, constitutes a crucial object of study. Platform studies has recently emerged as another related field, stressing the role of software, affordances and other structural elements of platforms (see Bucher, 2012; Plantin et al., 2016). This field focuses on the ways that communication and expression are enabled as well as constrained by the interplay among different heterogeneous actors involved in platforms (Plantin et al., 2016). Platforms lie at the heart of contemporary society affecting institutions, social practices, economy and much more (van Dijck et al., 2018). However, platforms should not be studied in isolation. The term “platform society” highlights “the inextricable relation between online platforms and societal structures” (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 2). Thus, understanding the platform society “requires a thorough analysis of the ecosystem’s dynamics and the techno-economic and sociocultural practices through which they take shape” (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 5). The field of critical internet studies points out this need. Hence, the present doctoral dissertation is situated squarely within the aforementioned domains,

following its main objectives by investigating the materiality of new media as well as the surrounding discourses and their users.

In particular, drawing on the Debordian concept of the spectacle, the Foucauldian approach of power and principles of Actor Network Theory, this Ph.D. dissertation investigates the Instagram platform as a sociotechnical assemblage of heterogeneous human and non-human actors exploring the power relations articulated on it and investigating the interplay between platform, algorithms and “ordinary” users. For that purpose, three empirical studies have been conducted focusing on different entities of the Instagram assemblage, namely i) the platform’s structural elements, such as affordances and algorithms, ii) discourses on Instagram and iii) Instagram users, exploring the following master research questions: *Which is the ideal use of the Instagram platform? How does Instagram function as a norm-(re)producing mechanism and how it constructs user subjectivities? What power mechanisms does Instagram employ? How do users react to these mechanisms?* The empirical study is grounded on an original research design utilizing the strengths of various methods such as interface and content analysis, algorithmic auditing method and in-depth interviews.

1.4 The structure of the dissertation and forthcoming chapters

This doctoral dissertation consists of nine main Chapters and is constructed as follows. Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical framework conceptualizing the study. The Ph.D.’s research design aims to investigate the relations between software and users and, specifically, how the Instagram platform and its structural elements may construct subjectivities and norms inducing certain desires and behaviors and how users may react to that. Hence, Section 2.1 of the theoretical framework draws on the concept of power, which can provide significant insights into how these relations are articulated and function, focusing on the Foucauldian perspective of power. In Section 2.1, Michel de Certeau’s perspective on agency is introduced and analyzed. Section 2.2 identifies the potential actors that participate in the formation of power relations, drawing on Actor Network Theory and Assemblage Theory, while describing the role of interface’s affordances. These perspectives stress the role of human and non-human elements, material entities and social elements as well as the multiple heterogeneous relations that may emerge. Focusing on commercial platforms, Section 2.3 presents the concept of the ideal user and subject positions, which are key concepts for this doctoral research, as they constitute a manifestation of platforms’ power. Section 2.4 presents an overview of the Instagram platform by reviewing existing related studies. This section lays out the complexity of the platform, stressing the need of investigating the ways it inscribes subjectivities, the role of algorithms as well as its users. Section 2.5 describes Instagram through the idea of the reputation economy and self-branding highlighting its commercial nature. It concludes by analyzing Guy Debord’s work on the “Society of the Spectacle,” which informs the study’s research questions. The last part of the theoretical framework, Section 2.6, explains how the

various theoretical perspectives are combined and built together so as to construct the overall theoretical foundation of the doctoral research.

Chapter 3 is a brief overview of the methodological procedure of the dissertation. Firstly, the Instagram Assemblage is defined, analyzed, and presented through a diagram describing its entities and the relation among them. This section also includes the overarching research questions. In addition, it presents the research plan and a brief overview of the methods of the dissertation's three studies.

Next, in Chapter 4, the first Study of this dissertation is presented, entitled "User subjectivities on Instagram: The ideal Instagrammer," along with its findings. Drawing on the Debordian concept of the spectacle, principles of Actor Network Theory, and assemblage theory, I examine how the Instagram assemblage functions as a norm-(re)producing mechanism and how it constructs user subjectivities. I analyzed the platform's design and interfaces, applying a discursive interface analysis, combining Stanfill's (2015) and MacLeod and McArthur's (2019) approaches. In addition, the surrounding discourses, namely Instagram press releases and web articles, were taken into account and analyzed qualitatively. The interface analysis, together with the analysis of surrounding discourse, indicates that four types of "ideal" users and subjectivities are prescribed on Instagram. Based on this analysis, I argue that Instagram closely resembles a contemporary spectacle, "Spectacle 2.0" (see Briziarelli & Armano, 2017), whose key logic is the aestheticization of everyday life with various repercussions.

Chapter 5 presents the second study of this PhD dissertation, entitled "Instagram Algorithms: De-coding Instagram as a Spectacle." This study focuses on the Instagram algorithms and the filter bubble assumption. In 2016, Instagram integrated personalization algorithms into its system, promising to show the moments they believe users will care about the most. The platform's personalization logic and its commercial nature raise concerns regarding the emergence of filter bubbles and "individual realities," privileging topics that reflect a firm market logic and represent an ideal reality with brands and products. The second study aims to investigate the existence of a filter bubble on Instagram, posing the following questions: Do filter bubbles exist on Instagram? Do Instagram algorithms favor commercial soft topics? The study employs the algorithm auditing method, creating two "fake" user accounts. The first one represents a user who is interested in soft topics, namely commercial and mainstream content. The second account impersonates a user who is involved in public oriented topics, such as activism. Both accounts' recommendations were collected and analyzed qualitatively. The analysis shows that Instagram algorithms render certain topics much more salient, generating a filter bubble of soft topics that closely resembles what Guy Debord introduced as the spectacle.

Chapter 6 presents the third and last study of the research, entitled “Exploring users’ perspectives.” This third study investigates users’ perspectives, beliefs, feelings and practices. Based on the results of the two previous studies, in the third study, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with Instagram “ordinary” users in order to explore how they react to Instagram power mechanisms. Shaw’s model (2017) of *using positions* was used as a starting point in order to understand user’s agency. The results show that individuals adopt different using positions, *following*, *negotiating*, *opposing* and *subverting* the platform and its inscribed subjectivities and norms.

Taking everything into account, this dissertation results to Chapter 7, namely the Conclusion Chapter of the dissertation. Firstly, an overview of the findings is presented in relation to the other empirical studies focusing on Instagram so far. In this chapter, de Certeau’s approach regarding place and space is utilized in order to analyze the platforms’ ecosystem and reveal the strategies for constructing the Instagram place and the tactics that can transform it into space. Thus, Instagram is seen as a “digital city” where people can “walk,” altering its spatiality. The chapter concludes with a discussion about which is the ultimate level of user resistance, bringing into attention the notions of *voyeur* and *walker* while introducing a new notion, that of the *transient*.

The dissertation concludes in Chapter 8, which lays out the contribution and the limitations of this research. In addition, the future studies and research directions, as well as proposed public actions are presented as well.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Power relations

2.1.1 Towards the concept of power

Critical approaches to the study of the internet and web 2.0 are directly connected to the notions of power and resistance. Research in this field usually focuses on how power structures are articulated on the web, how they operate and how they affect users. Power, however, is a controversial notion. Many traditional approaches, such as Marxism, claim that power stems from the class conflict, institutions, and the state (Λυριντζής [Lyrintzis], 1995). However, this doctoral research follows Foucault's approach to power: as in the context of web 2.0, we can claim that power does not forbid or repress users' actions as people are free to participate, but it demarcates them by structuring specific actions and conduct. As Foucault wrote (1982, p. 789), "it [the exercise of power] is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions." Foucault's approach can help us understand how power is exercised on web 2.0 environments and how power relations are articulated.

According to the Foucauldian perspective, power is seen as a relational force, as there is no one source of power, such as institutions or a group of mechanisms which ensure subordination through the system of law (Foucault, 1978). In particular, he perceives power as "the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization" (Foucault, 1978, p. 92). Power relations are always local, unstable and are engendered constantly due to their inequality. According to him, what defines a power relationship is that:

It is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future (Foucault, 1982, p. 789).

Consequently, power does not act directly on the subjects but on their actions, demarcating their practices and behavior.

Foucault referred to the notion of *government* or *governmentality*, terms used interchangeably (Bucher, 2012), not as a political structure, but as "the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed" (Foucault, 1982, p. 790) or otherwise the techniques and procedures which direct human behavior (Foucault & Rabinow, 1997) – what has broadly been known as the "conduct of conduct" (Rose, 1999). As Rose (1999, p. 3) has noticed, "Foucault implied that, rather than framing investigations in terms of state or politics, it might be more productive to investigate the formation and transformation of theories, proposals, strategies and

technologies for the conduct of conduct.” Hence, we should investigate the techniques, the ways and the technologies which shape and direct the conduct of others. Thus, in this study, platforms, algorithms and software can be seen and be understood through the concept of *government*. In particular, they can be seen as *technologies of government* through which power relations may arise. Those technologies, according to Rose (1999, p. 52), are “imbued with aspirations for the shaping of conduct in the hope of producing certain desired effects and averting certain undesired events.”

A key point of Foucault’s conceptualization of power is that he approaches it as a *productive* force. Power is not violent and does not punish; instead, “it is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely” (Foucault, 1982, p. 789). Yet, power is not only a productive force but a constraining as well, as it restricts alternative possibilities of being and talking (Bucher, 2012). Web 2.0 constitutes an environment beset with power relationships in which algorithms and codes induce certain things to happen, exercising power over users by acting upon their actions. A clear illustration of that is Bucher’s research (2012) in which, based on Foucault’s conceptualization of power, she investigates how software pushes, urges, and compels other actors to do something.

At the same time, in the Foucauldian sense, a necessary component for power to be exercised is freedom. Freedom is commonly perceived as the right of individuals to act as they wish without any restriction, and, thus, the idea that one is governed through freedom is quite paradoxical (Rose, 1999, p. 62). Especially in the age of web 2.0, it is a popular belief that ordinary users are able to act and participate in it freely. Nonetheless, according to Foucault, freedom constitutes a precondition of the existence of power, as “power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free” (Foucault, 1982, p. 790). Thus, the case is not that freedom confronts power; it seems that they coexist. According to Rose (1999, p. 65),

we can distinguish freedom as a formula of resistance from freedom as a formula of power. Or rather, to be more circumspect, between freedom as it is deployed in contestation and freedom as it is instantiated in government. I want to suggest some ways of understanding freedom in this second sense: freedom as it has been articulated into norms and principles for organizing our experience of our world and of ourselves; freedom as it is realized in certain ways of exercising power over others; freedom as it has been articulated into certain rationales for practising in relation to ourselves.

In this vein, it is exactly due to the existence of this sense of freedom that people accept power, as they feel it constitutes just a limit to their desires (Foucault, 1978). Therefore, even if individuals feel that they can act in any desired way, this may be just a precondition of the existence of power as their actions may be directed. As Rose (1999, p. 4) has stressed, “to

govern humans is not to crush their capacity to act, but to acknowledge it and to utilize it for one's own objectives." Social media platforms are usually conceptualized as tools that help people communicate, without any indications that they may exercise power over them. Still, the promoted users' freedom can be a precondition of the existence of power.

Another way for power to be accepted is to hide a fundamental part of it, as "power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms" (Foucault, 1978, p. 84). More often than not, the opaque informational technologies of the web act covertly, as they hide their processes and aims, while at the same time the technological environment is conceptualized as a free space (Miloni, 2015) and the algorithmic systems as neutral, promising objectivity (Gillespie, 2014). In addition, algorithms have become necessary mediators in users' everyday life, mediating more and more of their online actions (Diakopoulos, 2013; Gillespie 2014; Willson, 2017). As Diakopoulos (2013, p. 2) contends,

algorithms adjudicate more and more consequential decisions in our lives. It's not just search engines either; it's everything from online review systems to educational evaluations, the operation of markets to how political campaigns are run, and even how social services like welfare and public safety are managed. Algorithms, driven by vast troves of data, are the new power brokers in society.

Willson (2017) stresses that more and more of our everyday activities are conducted online and through algorithmic systems, such as when one receives Google map directions or personalized search results. These activities seem banal and mundane, but this is what renders them unquestioned (Willson, 2017). For instance, regarding online relationships, Bucher (2012) shows that software and Facebook configures and intervenes in the formation of online friendship and sociality. Hence, in the context of this study it is rather significant to investigate whether users are aware of the regulative power software and platforms may exert on them and what freedom comes to mean in this context.

Extending Foucault's concept of power, Deleuze (1992) has stressed that the disciplinary society has been replaced by the society of control. In this type of society, the mechanisms of both control and surveillance do not constitute environments of enclosure, such as hospitals, schools or Foucault's panopticon. On the contrary, the new form of surveillance is constituted by data mining and data collection. Individuals have become "dividuals," namely masses, samples, data, markets or "banks" of information, given that the new language of this society is numerical (Deleuze, 1992, p. 5). Taking this development into account, one's self is therefore transformed into a digital self, constantly divided and subdivided. Not only do users provide their data but software and algorithms can also collect them in order to generate users' digital identities, which are then translated into data to be consumed. This new type of society is based

on freedom of action, while simultaneously being vulnerable to manipulation, surveillance and control (Cheney-Lippold, 2011).

2.1.2 Users' agency: the possibility of resistance

According to the Foucauldian approach, power has the capability to guide users through the system of relations and restrain their actions. However, as there is no one source of sovereignty, there is not a sole form of great denial and resistance, but rather diverse types of the latter (Foucault, 1978). This conceptualization of power does not foreclose the possibility of resistance. As Foucault (1978, p. 96) writes, "it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible, somewhat similar to the way in which the state relies on the institutional integration of power relationships."

Foucault's conceptualization focuses on the transformation of violence into disciplinary technologies and strategies. Nevertheless, it is vital, in order to understand the real power of platforms, to investigate and bring to light also the ordinary tactics of people, who may resist silently. Michel de Certeau (1984), in his study of everyday life, attempted to restore and reveal individuals' agency, deconstructing their conceptualization as passive and weak against power. The key element of his theory is that individuals are not passive consumers. In contrast, they produce and resist invisibly, without rejecting the system and making their actions visible. Common people subvert the system through their tactics, escaping from it without leaving it; thus, resistance may be located within power relations.

De Certeau (1984) separates the notion of strategy from that of tactics. By the former he describes the actions of structures of those in power, assuming a place that "can be circumscribed as proper and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it. Political, economic, and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xix). On the other hand, tactics are the everyday practices, the "art of the weak," which are characterized by the absence of a "proper locus" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37). Some essential questions spring from de Certeau's theory: Which are the tactics of users in the web 2.0 environment and, specifically, Instagram platform? Do users attempt to subvert the system without rejecting it? What do users do when they encounter the strategies of power on the web? What do they think silently and invisibly? As users constitute a vital entity in the socio-technical assemblage of social media and, by extension, Instagram, de Certeau's perspective constitutes a crucial entry point to explore the aforementioned questions.

Drawing on the theory of everyday practices, Willson (2017) leaves space for users' resistance when they experience the power of algorithms and as Bucher (2016a) claimed, users are potentially able to affect algorithmic process. Adding on that, Rader and Grey (2015) proved

that users impact the algorithmic system through their actions and behavior, causing a “feedback loop.” An obvious instance of resistance in the everyday experience of the web is the tactic of *obfuscation* (Brunton & Nissenbaum, 2011). According to Brunton and Nissenbaum (2011, p. 1) means “producing, misleading, false or ambiguous data to make data gathering less reliable and therefore less valuable”, misleading algorithms. In the case of Instagram, several studies has focused on users and especially, female ones, documenting the struggle between users and the platform. On the one hand, some users feel empowered and in control and resist through the platform (see Caldeira et al., 2021; Olszanowski, 2014), but on the other hand, Instagram drives them towards specific actions (see Tiidenberg, 2015; Caldeira et al., 2021). Nonetheless, further research is required on the relationship of ordinary people with data structures in order to be able to understand it clearly (Kennedy, 2016; Caldeira et al., 2021).

2.2 Tracing the actors

2.2.1 Actor Network Theory: human and non-human elements

We cannot claim anymore that technology and, especially, platforms are neutral or value-free constructs (van Dijk et al., 2018). Technology plays a crucial role in the mediation of human relationships, as “we cannot understand how societies work without an understanding of how technologies shape our everyday lives” (Latour, 1992, p. 151). As mentioned above, Foucault perceived power as the multiplicity of force relations. But who and what constitutes these relations? One of the most essential arguments of Actor Network Theory (ANT) is that objects, otherwise non-humans such as technology and their structural elements, have agency and can cause transformations in human actions (Latour, 1992). For instance, the inconvenience of a heavy hotel key reminds individuals to bring it back before they leave the hotel building. For Latour, this is the “program of action” that prescribes to people qualities and behavior (Latour, 1992). In the case of software (and Instagram in particular), this corresponds to how the platform’s technical elements can set in motion transformations in human actions.

For ANT, social is the name of a type of momentary association, by humans and non-humans, which “is characterized by the way it gathers together into new shapes” (Latour, 1992, p. 65). Actor is “any thing that does modify any state of affairs by making a difference” (Latour, 2005, p. 71), whether it is a human or not. However, ANT does not claim the inertia of humans and the action of objects. On the contrary, it puts equal emphasis on both human and non-human elements as possible actors within a network. The theory emphasizes the question who and what is participating in an action and how, as things may “authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on” (Latour, 2005, p. 72). At this point, we can notice the relation between ANT and the notion of affordance (see below Section 2.3). For instance, based on ANT, Taina Bucher (2012) investigated the multiple actors, human and non-human entities, who participate in the formation of sociality and

friendship into the Facebook platform. She perceived the platform as a sociotechnical entity or assemblage of heterogeneous relations and actors, such as people, technology, algorithms, values etc. Through her research, the role of objects and specifically of algorithms (friends suggestions such as “People you may know”) is stressed, as well their effect on users’ actions regarding friendship. The concept of ANT contributes significantly to the investigation of web 2.0, which is constituted by multiple heterogeneous relationships, including users, codes, values, algorithms, data and other entities. Technology, as Latour (1992) claims, can determine and force specific actions, and according to Foucault (1982, p. 789) the action upon an action constitutes power.

Bruno Latour and Actor Network Theory draw attention to both material artefacts and human entities, criticizing technological deterministic approaches as well as the anthropocentrism and social constructivism in technology studies. Latour (2005) has put equal emphasis on material entities and social elements. Thus, his approach is strongly related to the way Deleuze and Guattari have explained the assemblage way of thinking (Acuto & Curtis, 2014). The concept of assemblage describes the relation between heterogeneous elements, such as bodies, materials, discourses, ideas and so on, which display some form of consistency and regularity (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Bousquet, 2014). The idea of the study of both material entities and elements, such as discourses and ideology, is stressed by the field of critical internet studies as well, as it has already been mentioned. The relations which are formed and with which the social assemblage is structured, are described as a network and not as structure, owing to the fact that each entity independently exists outside of these relations (Bousquet, 2014). In particular, in the case of technology, it is vital to scrutinize the broader social assemblage, as it determines “its mode of production, the value attributed to it, and its distribution and employment in the social field, none of which are intrinsic features of the object” (Bousquet, 2014, p. 95). Additionally, when it comes to algorithms, it is essential to understand and examine their socio-technical assemblage (Gillespie, 2014; Kitchin, 2017). In that way, researchers avoid putting the blame on the algorithm¹ for the entire assemblage (Chun, 2011). Furthermore, they can locate the relations of heterogeneous actors, something that it is necessary in order to avoid leaving behind the social aspect in the examination of algorithms (Kitchin, 2014). Robert Kitchin (2014) tried to outline the socio-technical assemblage surrounding algorithms, presenting a number of elements such as infrastructure/hardware, code, platforms, data, and interfaces, which are framed and conditioned by forms of knowledge, legalities, governmentalities, institutions, marketplace, finance etc. Taking everything into account, the socio-technical assemblage constitutes a necessary method in order to study technology (Acuto & Curtis, 2014; Kitchin, 2014), as we should not focus only

¹ The notion of algorithm is usually used in the singular form in the literature as a convention. However, algorithmic systems consist of hundreds of algorithms woven together (Kitchin, 2014). The term is mainly used in the singular form in this dissertation as well, following this convention.

on the relation between human and non-human entities but on the ideologies, discourses and other elements as well.

Many researchers have highlighted the significance of the discourses surrounding technology. Beer (2017), based on Foucault and his articulation of truth, stressed the importance of discourses aligned with the notion of algorithms, as being part of algorithmic power. As he writes, “the notion of the algorithm is part of the social power we should be exploring” (Beer, 2017, p. 9), as power does not exist just in code but in the social consciousness as well. So, we have to understand “how notions of the algorithm move out into the world, how they are framed by the discourse and what they are said to be able to achieve” (Beer, 2017, p. 10). Epstein and Robertson (2015) revealed the power of the algorithmic notion and the discourse around it. Specifically, demonstrating trust to search engines, users accepted biased results without a second thought. Nonetheless, it is not easy to trace the actors of a heterogeneous network and their relations and especially into the complex environment of web 2.0. A significant inhibitor, according to many researchers, is the “black box” nature of algorithmic media (Diakopoulos, 2013; Kitchin, 2014; Kulshrestha et al. 2017; McKelvey, 2014). Taina Bucher, attempting to bypass this obstacle, shed light on the prospects researchers have, stressing that “the black box is not something to be feared” (2016b, p. 86). Her *technography approach* is “a way of describing and observing technology in order to examine the interplay between a diverse set of actors (both human and non-human)” in a way similar to methods of ethnography (Bucher, 2016b, p. 86). This approach focuses on technology and its embedded norms and values, trying to reveal what the software is actually suggesting, by making it talk. The key point of her approach is the assemblage of information from different sources, such as the visual output of an algorithm. Additionally, she proposes the study of the surrounding discourses by studying a variety of sources such as conference papers, media reports, blog posts, press releases, etc. This means that the answers may not be in the black box (or at least not exclusively); in contrast, we often have to ask people to express their experiences and feelings or search for breakdowns, accidents or controversies.

Consequently, if we want to enrich the study of technology and of its black box nature, it is necessary to “explore both the material and discursive interventions and the ways in which they combine to afford social power through the production and maintenance of certain truths” (Beer, 2017, p. 8). The discourse surrounding algorithms and their processes might reveal something of the broader system they are part of (Beer, 2017). This research incorporates this perceptive and aims to delve also into the discourses surrounding Instagram, as is discussed below in detail.

2.2.2 Affordances: the materiality of interfaces

ANT theory drives us to affordance theory. The notion of affordances, firstly introduced by cognitive psychologist James Gibson (1979), refers to the possibilities for action that objects, such as rocks or trees, offer to animals, birds or fish. Affordances are not measurable as other parameters are in physics; instead, they have to be measured relative to the subject or the animal, as Gibson argued (2014, p. 120), pointing out the relational property between the environment and the observer. Thus, each observer can perceive each affordance differently. For instance, what could be a trap for an animal, it could be a useful tool for a hunter. However, affordances are stable and “do not change as the need of the observer changes. The observer may or may not perceive or attend to the affordance, according to his needs, but the affordance, being invariant is always there to be perceived” (Gibson, 2014, p. 130). Therefore, each can interact differently with each affordance, which sometimes can favor a specific group and marginalize another. As Sun and Hart-Davidson (2014, p. 3538) write “affordances also may come with unequal relations of power, and user agency in the network is a process of power distribution: some groups of users are privileged while some might be ignored, marginalized, or even oppressed.” One of the central questions in regard to affordance theory is what information is available to be perceived in ambient light (Gibson, 2013, p. 140). Platforms (such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, etc.), through their affordances, suggest, enable and constrain users’ actions, as each platform has been designed in such a way that enables certain things and restrains others. Nonetheless, it is useful to note that affordances exist in the environment to demarcate the possibilities of action, to constrain and control behavior and not to cause a specific one (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Thus, affordances are strongly related with the notion of power, given that through them, humans’ behavior may be directed.

Expanding the notion of affordances into a different field of studies, Donald Norman (1988), coming from the Human-Computer Interaction field, introduced the term in design studies, focusing on the power of the designer. From his point of view, designers enable and constrain certain actions through their choices, as they drive users to specific practices through their design choices alone. The connection between the design and orientation of behavior is clear in Norman’s (1988, p. 9) quote that “when simple things need pictures, labels or instructions, the design has failed,” pointing out that the design is able to guide users’ behavior, otherwise it is not successful. However, according to Hutchby (2001), it is quite significant to adopt a perspective which is driven neither from realism, focusing on the power of technical objects, nor from constructivism, stressing the power of human agency. On the other hand, Hutchby (2001, p. 444) proposes a combination of these two approaches, underlining simultaneously the constraining and enabling perspectives of affordances, as well as “the materiality of technology as a worldly object.” Moreover, he draws a parallel between affordances and texts, which have a “preferred” reading (cf. Hall, 1973) incorporated by the developers, producers, and marketers, but, at the same time, users are expected to “read” them in their own unique way – not unlike de Certeau’s (1984) argument about users’ potential to resist and reappropriate the preferred reading of a text. Hutchby’s understanding of affordances stresses the possibility

for negotiation and resistance on the part of users. Hence, users may not follow designers' instructions, and thus we should study how users actually perceive each affordance and act on it.

The distinction of affordances into categories can significantly contribute to their efficient investigation. Bucher and Helmond (2018) mention two distinct dimensions of affordances: abstract, high-level and concrete, feature-oriented low-level affordances. They propose to analyze both dimensions in tandem combining those two levels, as many researchers do. High-level affordances are "the kinds of dynamics and conditions enabled by technical devices, platforms and media" (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 12). In their research, Fox and Moreland (2015) explore the relational and psychological stressors associated with Facebook affordances, pointing out some high-level affordances of Facebook: connectivity, visibility, social feedback, persistence and accessibility. These kinds of possibilities are not connected with a specific button, but express a more broad and abstract level of practices, norms and habits. On the other hand, low-level affordances are "typically located in the materiality of the medium, in specific features, buttons, screens and platforms" (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 12). The analysis of the "like" button, as presented in the research of Gerlitz and Helmond (2013), is a clear example of what low-level affordances in fact are. For many users this specific button may stand as a mere possibility to express themselves and thus they may often use it unquestionably. However, the specific low-level affordance has contributed to the formation of an entire business model. Indeed, Facebook has tried to create a more "social" web, establishing the well-known *like economy*. According to Gerlitz and Helmond (2013), the social plugins and specifically the "like" button permits the exchange of data, traffic, affects, connections and above all money, intensifying the practices of data mining as well as web analytics. What makes the difference is the merging of both decentralised data production and recentralised data processing, as Facebook traces and gathers users' data inside and outside the platform through the "like" button. Therefore, users' social activities are gaining economic value. In this vein, high and low level affordances are extremely significant aspects of the platform's operation, indicating, in many cases, hidden values and operations. The current research design looks into both dimensions of affordances.

In order to detect the affordances that exist in platforms, it is quite significant to follow a systematic method. To investigate them, we have to look into platforms and their structural elements and design, detecting the multiple relations engendered. Stanfill (2015) proposes the approach of "discursive interface analysis", a method which can explore the norms produced by affordances. Stanfill's method is distinguished from other frameworks of Human-Computer Interaction in two main points, which renders clear the distinct perspective of this approach (Stanfill, 2015, p. 1062). Firstly, discursive interface analysis looks for what is available for users to want or to choose, while as Stanfill claims (2015, p. 1062), the Human-Computer Interaction approach "assumes site visitors know what they want so sites must try to suit them."

Thus, although both frameworks investigate what interfaces produce (Stanfill, 2015), their perspectives are different. Secondly, this method focuses critically on the possibly unequal power between users and industries. Stanfill (2015), drawing on Hartson (2003), distinguishes four types of affordances: *cognitive*, *physical*, *sensory* and *functional*. In addition, as mentioned above, Bucher (2016b) suggests, through her technography approach, observing technology and software to identify heterogeneous relationships. Therefore, a focus on the platforms and their interfaces can possibly render visible the interplay between humans and non-human objects.

2.3 Subjectivation: Ideal users and subject positions

As Sun and Hart-Davidson (2014, p. 6) claimed, “the interface of a computing technology is the manifestation of its implicit politics and ideology.” Platforms, such as Instagram, are constructed bearing the ideal use and user of that software; thus, designers construct the platforms in a way that can enact certain subject positions, the *ideal subjects* (Gehl, 2014). Platforms drive users toward specific actions and norms through their affordances and their structural elements, potentially affecting the construction of users’ identity. Latour (1992), in his seminal text “Where are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts”, describes how decisions and behaviors are delegated to technology through a process he calls *prescription*. Prescription is “the behavior imposed back onto the human by non-human delegates” and “the moral and ethical dimension of mechanisms” (Latour, 1992, p. 157) inscribed into the *program of action* of a certain artifact. These prescriptions enable certain users and can disable others (such as the example of the hydraulic door closer which “discriminate[s] against very little and very old persons”) (p. 159, original emphasis). Latour argues that machines can be compared to texts in the way they both construct builders/users and authors/readers, “inscribe” them in their “program of action”/“narrative program” and prescribe to them qualities and behaviors (1992, p. 160), which are similar to role expectations. The persuasive power of artifacts, then, becomes evident when “the prescribed user is so well anticipated, so carefully nested inside the scenes, so exactly dovetailed, that it does what is expected” (1992, p. 161). Yet, this work of meaning-making is not neatly arranged. Contradictory uses always emerge, as users can behave differently from what designers expected, preventing the adoption of the inscribed user and not “obeying” to the inscribed use. As Latour writes, “every piece of an artifact becomes fascinating when you see that every wheel and crank is the possible answer to an objection. The program of action is in practice the answer to an *antiprogram* against which the mechanism braces itself” (1992, p. 168, original emphasis). In this case, engineers may attempt to re-inscribe these “antiprograms” into the machines to preserve the original goal, usually by knowing users better (1992, p. 161), for instance through their data and algorithms. Platforms’ owners and designers try (not necessarily in full consciousness) through the entire design, affordances, algorithms, data and discourses, to enact the ideal use of a platform as well as certain subjectivities. The question, then,

becomes: which are the ideal subjectivities for each platform? And do users adopt them?

Platforms promote the ideal use and user through their structural elements, such as affordances, and rhetorical elements, such as discourses. At a first level, they enact the ideal subjectivity and behavior through the standardization of human conduct. Platforms' use is based on users' habits and has as its ultimate aim the standardization of users' conduct and the legitimization of consumer culture, as argued by certain critical approaches (van Dijck, 2013). For instance, users may be transformed to capitalist objects (Dahlberg, 2010; van Dijck, 2013) and trapped in a meaningless loop of constructed passive and standardized behavior (Dean, 2007). Society is based in the reproduction of daily activities, as individuals act in a common base of rules and norms, which are created as factual boundaries of social life. Through the repetition of activities, daily practices are naturalized (Willson, 2017). People interact and expect specific modes of conduct from other individuals, as the notion of *reflexive monitoring* explains (Giddens, 1984, p. 5). Accordingly, agents tend to repeat specific actions with specific limitations. Routines are vital both to the formation of the agent's personality through the repetition of daily activities and to the existence of institutions, through their reproduction in daily life. Thus, routine has the power to build institutions and vice versa (Giddens, 1984, p. 60-64). In the context of the contemporary age of web 2.0, social spaces tend to use and promote specific models of conduct to users, the "ideal" one, which is based on repetition and reproduction (van Dijck, 2013), following the values and norms of each platform and its design. Therefore, it is quite significant to look for users' repetitive, routine actions which may assist platforms to enact certain norms and institutions while driving users to react accordingly. Accordingly, this research looks for how the Instagram platform drives users to adopt a routine of actions, and the ways users behave and act.

At a second level, we should also stress the role of algorithms in the promotion of the ideal user and use. The technological infrastructure of the web relies hugely on "blackboxed" algorithms, which have the power to classify people, locations and objects and to correlate users' interests and choices; as a result, platforms present specific information to each user (Beer, 2009). Algorithms produce knowledge of individuals through advertisements and recommendations, thus users become positioned as this or that type of subject – for instance, one that is active, likes sports and listens to particular music. This leads us to what Introna (2016) has referred to as the *impressionable subject*, which is identified as the subject most likely to convert and buy a product or an idea, as she is the right person, at the right time, to see the right advertisement, get impressed and undergo a substantial change (Introna, 2016). Consequently, technology produces, otherwise enacts, the subject and not just traces it (Introna, 2016, p. 28). Therefore, a significant aspect of algorithmic power concerns what Cheney-Lippold (2011, 2017) labels *algorithmic identity* to refer to the statistical management of user data to infer and assign to users categories of identity, based on profiles that are created for them by collecting and combining information about their web-surfing habits. More

importantly, as a form of soft biopower of platforms, algorithms define the actual meaning of these identities, namely what “maleness,” “whiteness” or “working class” is or should be online, which interests, tastes, habits and political opinions algorithmically categorized users should have (Cheney-Lippold, 2011). As Facebook has announced, users’ profiles can determine one’s social class, without even calculating the latter’s income. In particular, Facebook’s patent, called “Socioeconomic Group Classification Based On User Features,” uses factors such as the education level, number of gadgets owned by someone, travel history etc., in order to determine whether a user belongs to the working, middle or upper class (Blue, 2018). Through this categorization, the platform provides a new possibility of targeted advertising, as the marketing agencies will now be able to boost products to users of a certain social class. Hence, Facebook in fact classifies its users into categories of class, providing targeted choices and products solely to specific users, deciding in this way the actual range of their choices, while at the same time (re)defining class itself. In addition, to take the example of gender, previous studies have revealed the existence of “gender scripts” in social media that articulate hegemonic representations of femininity (Friz & Gehl, 2016), as well as biased advertising content that perpetuates gender inequality – such as fewer ads related to high paying jobs are shown to female users (Datta, Tschantz & Datta, 2015). The construction of algorithmic identities means the simultaneous production of values and norms, as the algorithms translate in a specific way content and actions, factors such as gender or race, defining what male or female means online (Cheney-Lippold, 2011). Algorithms constitute part of Machine Learning models. Designers select specific data with specific features, such as gender and location, in order to create these models. Those data, used for the training process, create the machine learning model. The training data and their features, used to initiate the algorithm, can influence the construction of the model, as it inherits the characteristics and norms of the data. Therefore, the data can potentially add bias, which may be already existing in our society, on the models (Diakopoulos, 2013; Witten, Frank & Hall, 2016). Thus, the programmers who select the features and the training data can influence the behavior of the algorithm. As an illustration, if the selected data includes photographs depicting women washing dishes in their kitchen, then the algorithm will probably link the female gender with the specific activity of dishwashing and the kitchen. Hence, the algorithms can exhibit socially constructed behaviors appearing to be quite prominent in our society, further strengthening this prominence. In addition, it is essential to mention that more and more applications powered by machine learning technology have started using a class of techniques called deep learning (LeCun, Bengio & Hinton, 2015). Deep learning is a subset and a more modern and state-of-the-art area in the field of machine learning (Howard & Gugger, 2020). The major advantage of deep learning is that it uses the available data and entails minimal engineering by hand (LeCun et al., 2015). Therefore, although in traditional machine learning, engineering skills and domain experts are necessary in order to create patterns and reduce the complexity of the data for the algorithms, in the case of deep learning, the need for experts is eliminated (LeCun et al., 2015). On the one hand, deep learning has several advantages, as for instance, the method is good at pattern recognition

problems (see Li, 2018), while it has disadvantages and challenges as well (Li, 2018). On the other hand, deep learning relies more on completely automatic processes based on algorithms and data. This may be seen as one of its most important assets for engineers (see Li, 2018; LeCun et al., 2015), but it also means that human intervention is eliminated. The outcomes of deep learning as an end-to-end process are based solely on algorithms which are attributed with more responsibilities. This intensifies concerns regarding the algorithmic power, especially when deep learning does not guarantee bias removal (see Howard & Gugger, 2020).

Therefore, algorithms can significantly lead users to adopt specific subjectivities and norms and thus their role should be investigated. In the case of Instagram, the platform introduced an algorithm that personalizes content in users' accounts in March 2016. Since then, the platform has become more computational and algorithmic (Carah & Shaul, 2016). Considering the commercial nature of the platform along with the advantageous and prominent role of advertisers, brands, and influencers, who strategically leverage the Instagram algorithms (Cotter, 2019) in order to increase their visibility and fame, concerns are raised regarding the role of personalization in the dissemination of Instagram content and the formation of specific subjectivities.

2.4 The Instagram platform: an overview

The aim of this section is to provide an overview of Instagram, based on the research so far. The section includes studies that have been published until the beginning of 2022 and focus on the Instagram platform.

Nowadays, Instagram constitutes one of the most well-known social media platforms globally, being part of users' everyday lives, while more and more studies have started to focus on the investigation of Instagram. In 2020, a special issue devoted to the Instagram platform was published on *Social Media + Society* journal, titled "Studying Instagram Beyond Selfies" following a relevant conference hosted by Middlesex University London. Caliandro and Graham (2020) stressed that the literature as well as the special issues published so far related to the platform mainly focus on the selfie phenomenon. According to them there is a need for the exploration of the platform per se, in order to propose new theories, methodologies and approaches. This need exists as the platform has its own characteristics and poses its own challenges. Up to now, several studies have focused on the Instagram platform coming from various fields – for instance, marketing, urban studies, psychology, computer science, anthropology, etc. – exploring the platform from different perspectives and with different approaches (see Marwick, 2015; Boy & Uitermark, 2016; Lim, 2016; Miles, 2014; Rykov et al., 2016; Virtanen, Björk & Sjöström, 2017). Many of these studies view Instagram as a source of a range of data. For instance, Rykov et al. (2016) use a dataset of 47,410 Instagram images and investigate how people use the city of St. Petersburg and how they represent it on

Instagram. For them, the platform is a source of urban social media data that allows them to understand the relationship between inhabitants and the city. To give another example, studies coming from the marketing field perceive Instagram as a means for brand awareness and marketing practices (see Virtanen et al., 2017).

Focusing on the field of social sciences and critical internet studies, where this Ph.D. dissertation also belongs, Instagram per se has been investigated with a focus on its restrictions and opportunities to users as well as the relations with them and their practices. Most of the studies explore specific groups of users and their relation to the platform. A good illustration of that is how Crystal Abidin focuses on the phenomenon of selfies and influencers stressing the complexity of Instagram use (see Abidin, 2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2017). On the one hand, influencers appropriate Instagram tools to achieve their goals, capitalizing on its power and subverting Instagram affordances (Abidin, 2016a). According to Abidin (2016a), influencers have repurposed platform's suggested use through their commercial selfies. For instance, instead of spontaneous moments that Instagram suggests, they produce purposefully staged images. On the other hand, focusing on influencers and their followers, she indicates that followers are urged towards creative but also insidiously exploitative work (Abidin, 2016b). Users reproduce content that raises the profits of influencers and functions as free advertisements for brands. However, Abidin contends (2016b) that although followers do not gain any profits, they earn cultural capital through their visibility labour, when, for instance, influencers mention and identify them, characterizing these followers as the elite. This can sometimes enables followers to become prospective amateur influencers; thus, their labour can be seen as an investment for future financial rewards. The phenomenon of selfies and "Instafamous" has been also explored by Marwick (2015), who studies microcelebrities accounts. He claims that microcelebrities use several self-representation techniques so as to gain attention and fame. Instagram, through what is called "Instafamous", encourages the replication of fame hierarchies and images depicting buxom bodies, sports, cars, and designer clothes. Although users, such as influencers and some elite followers (see Abidin, 2016b), may take advantage of the platform gaining profit and subverting Instagram affordances (Abidin, 2016a), it seems that on Instagram a specific lifestyle and representation is also promoted by influencers (Marwick, 2015) which is usually promotional. The influencers reproduce dominant ideologies and sometimes make their followers produce "huge volumes of advertising content that is not only encouraged by Influencers and brands but also publicly utilised without remuneration or with little compensation" (Abidin, 2016b, p. 87). Therefore, users sometimes reproduce commercial content with the aspiration of gaining in cultural capital or becoming Influencers themselves. These studies intensify the need to explore the Instagram promoted content that users consume and are urged to reproduce, Instagram's inscribed subjectivities as well as the role of ordinary users on the platform (see also Caldeira et al., 2021).

The studies so far also show the commercial character of the platform, pointing out the ubiquitous brand advertising, the self-branding techniques, and the promotional behavior that some users adopt with the aim of becoming paid influencers (see Alshawaf & Wen, 2015; Carah and Shaul, 2016; Abidin, 2016b). Carah and Shaul (2016) refer to the significant role that businesses play on Instagram content, presenting how brands orchestrate the production of images as well as how gender norms are reproduced through them, also stressing the crucial role of algorithms on that process. Brands, businesses and influencers try to leverage Instagram algorithms in order to make users engage with their content and increase their visibility (Cotter, 2019). This can also lead to the standardization of content, such as a specific representation of the human body (Carah and Shaul, 2016). Tiidenberg (2015, p. 1754) claimed that “what is seen as photographable in a particular culture at a particular time illuminates the pertinent dominant ideologies.” Brands, businesses and popular accounts seem to be able to define what photographable is (see also Marwick, 2015). Carah and Shaul (2016) also highlight that “the efforts of brands to experiment with mobile media’s image machines, our bodies, and cultural spaces draw our attention to the need to critically examine how participatory, discursive, and algorithmic modes of control are interrelated” (p. 15). Instagram is a commercial platform whose architecture is always evolving to adapt to the latest market trends (Caliandro & Graham, 2020) and a place with more than 200 million business accounts (see <https://business.instagram.com/getting-started>). The commerciality of the platform and reputation economy can possibly influence the platform’s content as well as users’ behavior.

Although the studies that focus on Instagram algorithms are still rather limited, some researchers have explored how these algorithms work as a recommendation system. Cotter (2019) investigates how influencers interact with Instagram algorithms in order to gain visibility and influence on the platform. The study indicates that influencers are aware of algorithmic power and, therefore, they learn how to handle it developing specific tactics in order to pursue visibility. However, as Cotter (2019, p. 909) mentioned “the degree of technical knowledge and skill involved in the game may preclude participation among certain groups,” as several users are not aware of the existence of personalization and by extent they do not know how to interact with the algorithms. In addition, some influencers believe that in the platforms, prior to the algorithmic transition, offered equal opportunities for them to build their reputation, while the post-algorithmic-ranking platform demands “more time, energy, and money that not everyone can afford” (Cotter, 2019, p. 909). Many influencers may be in an advantageous position, playing with the algorithms (Cotter, 2019) and possibly shaping the platform’s content, while questions are raised regarding which content is promoted, disseminated, or highly ranked by Instagram algorithms. At the same time, algorithms can structure behavior in the platform, as users act in specific ways so as to influence them (Cotter, 2019). In addition, applying a critical perspective, Quick (2021) investigated how Instagram algorithms determine the visibility of influencers focusing on the “gay Instagram.” He applied a “netnographic” approach, combining practices from different methods, including algorithmic

audits. His results shows that algorithms favor the visibility of the western, white and wealthy gay person strengthening preexisting social biases. As he claims, “white elites in Western metropolises are made more visible to Instagram users, even when others could conceivably fulfill their same representational function, troubling the notion that influencer status can be attained through an individual’s ‘labor’ without algorithmic assistance” (2021, p. 3). Moreover, researchers from Columbia University (Stoica, Riederer & Chaintreau, 2018) studied social recommendations on Instagram and their effects on gender and homophily. Focusing on the platform’s algorithms from a computational perspective and using statistical analysis, the study reveals that algorithms can worsen pre-existing inequality and homophily, as men are more likely to be recommended to new users on Instagram by the algorithm, in contrast to women. Examining the Instagram activities of the Smirnoff brand and fashion retailer “General Pants”, Carah and Shaul (2016) highlighted that Instagram becomes more algorithmic and computational in the ways it presents images’ and brokers’ attention, as for example since 2014 the feed has become more targeted. However, existing studies do not examine the Instagram platform from a socio-technical perspective. Indeed, there lies the question of how Instagram algorithms actually work in relation to the discursive modes of power (Carah & Shaul, 2016). In addition, although the studies focusing on the Instagram algorithms per se are limited, there are indications that they should be investigated in depth, as the evidence so far suggests that they affect content’s and users’ visibility, possibly influencing also users’ behavior (Gillespie, 2014; Pasquale, 2015). However, it should also be mentioned that based on the study of Skrubbeltrang et al. (2017) some users are aware of the challenges of the algorithmic curation of their Instagram feed, leaving open questions about the relation between algorithms and users.

As has already been mentioned, several studies of the Instagram platform focus on specific groups of users, and many of them on female users. Studying Instagram feminists’ visibilities through the concept of “filtering,” Savolainen, Uitermark and Boy (2022) contend that Instagram is a challenging environment for feminists as the platform shapes and limits such cultures. On the one hand, the platform amplifies expression and boosts feminist thematics through the communication between feminist users and audiences. On the other hand, feminism “remains tightly within the confines of audience acceptance and interests” (Savolainen et al., 2022, p. 576). Thus, Instagram brings into light only some political sensibilities regarding feminism (Savolainen et al., 2022). Focusing on young women’s self-representational practices, Caldeira et al. (2021) highlight the complex negotiations between users and Instagram, as users feel empowerment and in control about posting photographs, but they simultaneously follow gendered stereotypes. In particular, the drive for popularity that is emphasized through the platform, steers users towards the adoption of specific strategies and the reproduction of popular content. In both aforementioned studies, users take advantage of Instagram to express themselves, but they also feel restricted by the platform’s tacit rules. In addition, stressing the platforms’ power and investigating how pregnant women are represented on Instagram, Tiidenberg and Baym (2017) refer to “intensive pregnancy” in order to describe

how pregnancy is performed on the platform. They stress how the combined discursive power of hashtags, images, and captions may enforce discursive hegemonies. Other studies focus on the way specific groups of female users represent themselves and what these performances mean. Tiidenberg (2015) analyzes the representation of russian-speaking pregnant women who share a particular style of femininity, namely an heterosexual traditional family and romantic relationships between opposite-sex partners. In 2018, she investigated visual discourses of women over 40 and 50 on Instagram. On the one hand, these discourses operate within a rhetoric that frames femininity through the discourse of a healthy, fashionable, happy mother, which according to Tiidenberg (2018, p. 12) reinforces “a makeover of ageing in ways that extend post-feminism’s coercive power over women’s lives.” On the other hand, a reparative reading revealed that women’s self-representation also incorporates rhetorical elements that do not reproduce post-feminist ideals. Olszanowski (2014) also shows how women challenge and appropriate the Instagram platform and its normative values surrounding censorship. They develop tactics of resistance against censorship policies, while also disputing bodynormativity. In particular, in order for women to subvert Instagram’s policies, they privatize their accounts, distort or cover the nude part of their bodies, and upload images for a short time. Thus, as Olszanowski (2014) argues, censorship can lead women to the formation of new aesthetics and to ‘unexpected power.’ This study indicates that users can reappropriate the platform and its power developing practices of resistance in ways that the designers could not predict. In addition, focusing on ordinary users and exploring the potentially negative effects on well-being, researchers (Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015), coming from the psychology field, have shown that users who follow more strangers on Instagram are more prone to making negative social comparisons between themselves and others. Therefore, they develop both negative feelings regarding their own selves and depressive symptoms. Another study (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016), focusing on college students, and their motives for Instagram use and its relationship to contextual age and narcissism, has uncovered several motives for the platform’s use. Instagram is used by sociable people for coolness, surveillance and creativity. In addition, participants who are socially active use it for documentation purposes. The aforementioned studies indicate how users perform their identity on Instagram, indicating signs of resistance, but at the same time how the platform itself and hegemonic discourses influence them. Instagram’s controversial character is stressed, as users may be affected and restricted by the platform, but, at the same time, they are empowered and express themselves, sometimes finding ways to overcome power. Furthermore, Instagram constitutes a controversial platform regarding users’ well-being and emotions as well as regarding the reasons why people use the platform. These studies also show that Instagram users are not passive and that they develop their own tactics on the platform while at the same time being affected by it in various ways. This ambivalence indicates the significance of further research that explores these intricacies in depth.

The complexity of the platform becomes evident when looking at Instagram accounts that are devoted on social causes, such as politics, human rights, body positivity, activism, social movements, etc. (Mahoney et al., 2016; Crowder, 2021; Savolainen et al., 2022; Cornet et al., 2017), while many politicians also have an Instagram account so as to engage with and influence citizens (Ekman & Widholm, 2017). Although the platform can be used as a means to promote and support collective goals (Cornet et al., 2017), studies draw attention to the fact that these goals can easily be commercialized on Instagram (see Afnan et al., 2019; Cwynar-Horta, 2016). For instance, brands and businesses take advantage of the body positive movements' raising popularity, capitalizing on their influence and resulting in the reproduction of dominant ideologies that are conducive to capitalism (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Afnan et al. (2019) also stressed the exploitation and commercialization of the MeToo movement on Instagram, as commercial accounts use the movement's hashtag to gain visibility resulting in its commercialization. Therefore, although we can claim that Instagram is a platform with diverse content, we should also examine whether genuine alternative content is equally disseminated and promoted on the platform.

The studies focusing on Instagram are increasing more and more, indicating the platform's significance. It should be mentioned that in the last few years books devoted on the Instagram platform have been published. In 2020, Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield and Crystal Abidin published their book entitled "Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures," describing how the application has developed as a platform and culture. The researchers also highlight the importance of the platform, arguing that it has affected several fields and parts of our society such as marketing, politics and urban space, while also altered the way that people communicate. In the same year, Sarah Frier (2020) published her book "No Filter: The Inside Story of Instagram," presenting the evolution of the platform and stressing how it has affected users' lives. In the book mentioned above, we can notice how Instagram has been affected by its purchase by Facebook, reflecting the aims and scope of its new owners, who started gradually commercializing the platform. In particular, one of the first alterations on Instagram in 2013 indicates their intentions, as Facebook changed Instagram's terms and conditions, allowing the company to sell users' photographs to third parties and advertisers without any compensation or individuals' permission (see Frier, 2020). Instagram's purchase by Facebook signified a turn in the app, as Leaver et al. claimed (2020, p. 39), "as a jewel in Facebook's suite of apps and offerings, Instagram is part of the Facebook empire, and the personal data of Instagram's users is subject to the same conditions, uses, analyses and potential misuses as any other Facebook user." In addition, in 2013, the platform introduced sponsored posts and advertisements in the United States, while this feature went global in 2015 (Frier, 2020). In the meantime, Instagram launched more tools for advertisers enabling them to have an insight into the analytics of their posts. Facebook gives prominence to the commercial aspect of the platform and, by extension, to advertisers. For instance, the platform allowed advertisers to upload 20-second videos, while users could create only 15-second video posts (Yeung, 2016).

Furthermore, in 2016, the Instagram feed became algorithm-driven, something that angered many users, given the opaque nature of algorithmic processes and the potential prevalence of commercial content (Leaver et al., 2020; Skrubbeltrang et al., 2017). Additionally, the platform started to penetrate people's everyday lives even more since the introduction of the *story tool* at the beginning of 2016, which also led Instagram to beat one of its biggest competitors, Snapchat (Leaver et al., 2020). Although in 2012 Facebook committed to keeping Instagram a separate platform from Facebook, it seems that this promise was forgotten, especially when Zuckerberg decided to redesign the back end of it adding the messaging option on the platform and when the Instagram founders left the platform (Leaver et al., 2021). Instagram is a social media platform that is constantly changing and is influenced by its owner's values and goals, something we should consider when investigating it.

The existing research reveals the ambivalent character of Instagram as well as the struggle between the platform's power and its users. Most studies focus on specific groups of people and particular phenomena, raising questions regarding how "ordinary" users utilize the platform and how Instagram influences their behavior. Algorithms seem to play a crucial role in the way content is ranked and distributed, affecting users' visibility and content. Bearing in mind Instagram's commercial character, more research is needed on the way algorithms work. In addition, although the platform sometimes may be seen as superficial, these studies indicate its complexity and the inner struggles that take place on the platform, as Instagram may be a place of empowerment but also a place that restricts, defines and influences users' behavior. Taking everything into account, more research is needed in order to investigate the impact of Instagram on "ordinary" users' everyday life, explore its power mechanisms and users' perspectives, feelings, and tactics so as to identify problematic areas, improve users' experience, and construct a more equal environment.

2.5 Instagram: A contemporary Spectacle?

2.5.1 The pursuit of reputation

Instagram is a social network platform and a photo-sharing application whose core is images. It allows its users to capture, edit, and share their photographs and videos, interact with other users through likes, comments, and private messages, while people consume a high number of images at every scroll. Users curate their online identity through the images they upload, which is also a way to catch others' attention and gain reputation. On Instagram, like on other social media platforms, reputation can be visible, tangible, and measurable through metrics and ranking algorithms (Gandini, 2016a; Hearn, 2010). Instagram users, and especially digital workers such as influencers, are constantly confronted with statistics and measurements of their own reputation and fame, such as likes, followers and ranking scores, which conceivably lead to a pursuit of reputation. Many digital platforms based on an economic system called *reputation economy*, which is a type of economy described by the increment of freelance

workers, the vital role of reputation and the emergence of digital tools in the field of communication (Gandini, 2016a, p. 8). The reputation economy is embedded into platforms such as Instagram, as users try to gain fame and attention usually by producing ideal images that are promotional in a gentle and persistent manner (Carah & Shaul, 2016, p. 72). One of the most common practices in this economic system is *self-branding*. The term describes a process of self-production and self-presentation, a type of immaterial and affective labour aiming to gain attention, reputation and potentially profit (Hearn, 2010). Instagram offers a number of tools and features, such as tags, time and location stamps and filters, which individuals use in order to present the best perspective of their self and gain attention. As a matter of fact, these tools constitute techniques for users to brand themselves. So far, studies have found that many Instagram users try to display the best version of themselves through their body image or their eating practices, while they compare themselves to each other and pay attention to their likes (see Baker et al., 2019; Baker & Walsh, 2020; Longo & Saxena, 2020). In addition, millennials utilize brands so as to express and construct their online identity through them (Longo & Saxena, 2020). Instagram can be seen as a platform built on reputation economy and self-branding techniques, while there are indications that it leads users to a pursuit of the ideal representation of themselves. Furthermore, brands play a central role on that, as they interweave with users' everyday life and identity. As Carah and Shaul (2016, p. 71) claim:

As a consumer puts on clothes they have bought from a fashion retailer in the privacy of their own bedroom, takes a selfie and posts it to Instagram with the brand hashtag, their bedroom and body becomes part of the promotional apparatus of the brand. Instagram enables market relations to form through everyday life and cultural space around the production and circulation of images.

Users and commercial profiles may produce that content, and by extension, individuals may consume images depicting an ideal lifestyle with, or sometimes without, brands. Instagram blends commercial content with the one shared by “ordinary” users, as it does not distinguish them (Carah & Shaul, 2016). The communities that are built in the platform work as an advertisement for Instagram to attract businesses, as according to its dedicated to businesses website, it suggests: “reach new audiences where businesses are welcomed and celebrated” (see <https://business.instagram.com/>). Therefore, the commercial nature of Instagram raises concerns regarding whether it reinforces a specific behavior through its structural elements and design so as to increase profits by satisfying brand accounts, advertisers, and businesses.

The pursuit of reputation and visibility as well as the tools and techniques promoted in order to gain fame, motivate a particular use of interfaces, the ideal one (Bucher, 2012; Gillespie, 2014; Grosser, 2014). The conceptualization of Instagram through the concepts of reputation, self-branding and brands, as well as Instagram's content, namely images and videos, leads us to Guy Debord's work *Society of the Spectacle* (1967/2002).

2.5.2 Building on Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle

In my critical investigation on Instagram, I draw on Guy Debord and his seminal work "The Society of the Spectacle" (1967/2002). Debord asserts that "In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (Debord, 1967/2002, p. 9). In the spectacle, mass media bombard audiences with millions of photographs representing the model of the ideal life, a representation of the world which is far removed from one's actual everyday life. Additionally, Debord has argued that the more of a spectator one becomes, the less one lives, as "the more he [sic] identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he [sic] understands his own life and his own desires" (1967/2002, p. 19). In our day and age, the spectacle is presented not just through movies and photographs in television, cinema and magazines but through state-of-the-art technology, interactive platforms and their affordances, algorithms and objects which actively interplay with users. In addition, corporate platforms have even more opportunities to silently penetrate individuals' life, and this is possibly the reason why Instagram has become such a strong corporate tool. It makes sense to liken Instagram to a contemporary spectacle in which millions of images, presenting various topics, are daily taken, shared and consumed on the platform. What Debord illuminates lays the basis for a further examination of the stimuli one receives, as, according to him, the stimuli are responsible for steering their desires. Therefore, the bombarding with stuff such as expensive cars, stylish clothes, ultimate travel destinations and high-tech gadgets, may have an impact on people's needs and "desire for more" (see Grosser, 2014) which is at the heart of the capitalist value-system. According to Debord (1967/2002, p. 28), the satisfaction of primary human needs has been replaced with "an incessant fabrication of pseudoneeds, all of which ultimately come down to the single pseudoneed of maintaining the reign of the autonomous economy." People ignore their own desires and set the "imposed" needs as a priority, so that representation becomes more important than actual living (Debord, 1967/2002). Hence, it is less about wearing an expensive dress or traveling to an ideal destination but rather about thinking what these represent to others. Nowadays, Instagram offers tools which help users promote the best version of them, reinforcing what has already been mentioned as self-branding. Accordingly, we may be concerned about whether Instagram users try to capture the best version of their sandwich instead of enjoying its taste or show that they attend a theatrical performance instead of having fun. Therefore, is it more important for individuals to produce the perfect "dividual" (see Deleuze, 1992), while simultaneously informing their network that they are living their life instead of actually doing so? As Debord highlighted (1967/2002, p. 13), the domination of economy is obvious in the degradation of being into having, but at the same time having is replaced by appearing. The study of Longo and Saxena (2020) intensifies these concerns, as millennials use brands so as to construct their ideal self on the Instagram platform, even though they do not present that ideal version of themselves offline. In the spectacle, as Debord claimed

(1967/2002), we live in a mere representation of life. Nowadays, it is worth investigating whether Instagram constitutes a part of the contemporary spectacle, reinforcing the representation of life and intensifying certain desires.

Instagram could be understood as a *technology of government*, which is imbued with aspirations to shape the conduct of users in order to produce desired effects through the entanglement of human and non-human entities. Driving users towards a conduct related to the spectacle, Instagram could direct users' desires and enact an ideal use of the platform through which it gains profit. If what Debord thought about the spectacle was possible to be achieved through traditional media, nowadays it can be assumed that it is much easier, as users simultaneously consume, produce and actively participate in the production of the spectacle. Thus, we should explore whether Instagram actually enact subjectivities and norms, closely associated with the spectacle and representation of life, and how users perceive them. In particular, is Instagram a contemporary spectacle? Does it enact norms related to the spectacle and affect users' everyday life, actions and routines? Are users actually free to use the platform as they wish or is the possible freedom a component of the existence of power?

2.6 Composing the theoretical foundation

The aforementioned theoretical perspectives are woven together composing the foundation of the proposed research, as it is described below.

Living in the *platform society*, platforms constitute an integral element of the social world (van Dijck et al., 2018). Drawing inspiration by Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, I explore the idea of whether Instagram resembles a contemporary spectacle. On the one hand, Instagram is a platform that has diverse content and users can freely upload images while they constantly consume content. On the other hand, the platform's owners, designers and businesses possibly attempt to steer users' behavior and reinforce a suggested representation of life in order to attract businesses and gain profit. Based on this assumption, Instagram may enact subjectivities and norms related to the spectacle and users may perceive and adopt them (or on the contrary negotiate them). Drawing on Foucault's conceptualization of power, Instagram and its structural elements can be seen as a technology of *government* through which power relations may arise. Therefore, what is particularly interesting is to question how and through which techniques power induces and seduces. In other words, what does software render easy or difficult and in which way? In order to understand power relations we should detect the actors involved in them. First and foremost, the unpacking of the socio-technical assemblage constitutes a necessary method in order to study platforms, algorithms and technology (Acuto & Curtis, 2014; Kitchin, 2014). In this vein, Actor Network Theory plays a vital role in the current doctoral study, given that in order to investigate the platform's power and detect power relations, human as well as non-human elements should be traced. Platforms comprise of

several non-human elements, such as affordances and algorithms, through which ideal subjectivities are enacted. Affordances are strongly related to the notion of power, given that through them, human behavior may be directed. Hence, in order to understand the power of platforms, we have to look into the different dimensions of affordances while also investigate how their algorithms works. Consequently, the following questions arise: What actions do platforms' affordances enable and constrain? Do they favor specific groups and actions? Do they steer users' behavior and how? Focusing not only on the relation between human and non-human entities but on the ideologies, discourses and other elements as well, as the assemblage way of thinking and the field of critical internet studies indicate, this research also aims to delve into and analyze the discourses surrounding the platform exploring how Instagram and its tools are conceptualized.

In addition, in order to understand the actual power relations, we should delve into the perspective of individuals as well, and question how power functions regarding users' actions. In this respect, this doctoral research draws on de Certeau to investigate the questions related to power and resistance and potentially uncover users' beliefs, feelings, practices and tactics so as to better understand the power relations and struggles unfolding within the Instagram platform.

3. Methodological Framework: a brief outline

3.1 The Instagram Assemblage and the master research questions

According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 397),

the principle behind all technology is to demonstrate that a technical element remains abstract, entirely undetermined, as long as one does not relate it to an assemblage it presupposes. It is the machine that is primary in relation to the technical element: not the technical machine, itself a collection of elements, but the social or collective machine, the machinic assemblage that determines what is a technical assemblage at a given moment, what is its usage, extension, comprehension, etc.

Based on their conceptualization of technology, assemblage theory is perceived to be a useful and necessary methodological tool in order to understand technology itself (Acuto & Curtis, 2014; Kitchin, 2014). Therefore, the first step of this research is to deploy the Instagram Assemblage by identifying the heterogeneous entities as well as the relations among them. Robert Kitchin (2014, p.11) has also presented a figure regarding the digital sociotechnical assemblage of algorithms (see Figure 1). Based on his perspective, another diagram has been created (Figure 2), describing the entities and the complex relationships that structure the Instagram assemblage, which is presented in detail below. This approach also draws on the Foucauldian concept of the “dispositif” (apparatus), which consists of “discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid” (Foucault, 1980, p. 194), which maintain the exercise of power. This approach allows us to examine discourses by keeping sight of the formation of power relations in and through such discourses.

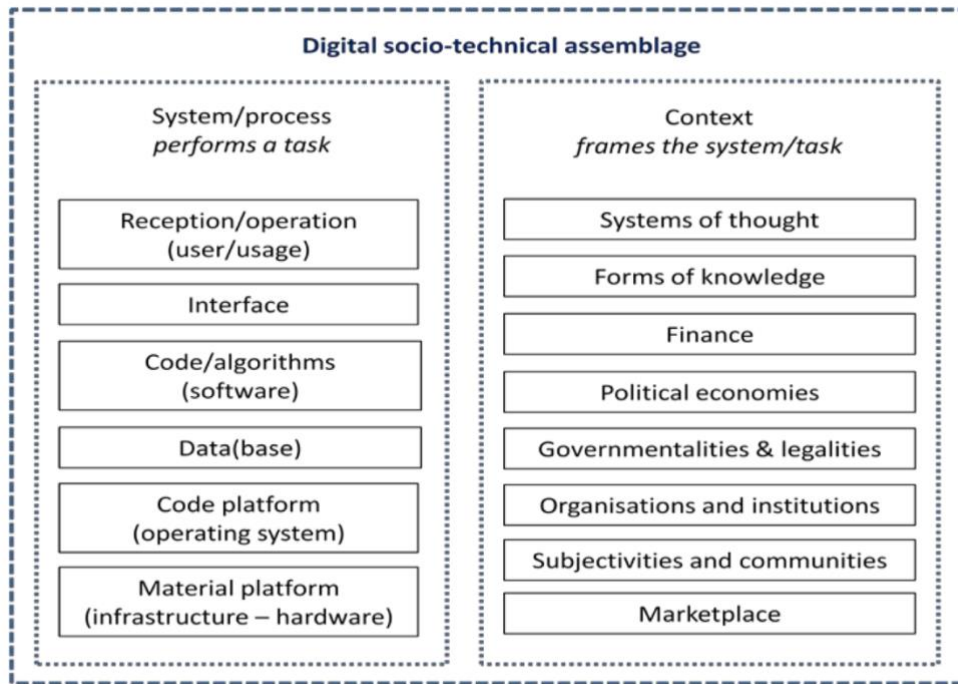


Figure 1 The socio-technical assemblage surrounding algorithms, reproduced from Kitchin (2014, p.11)

INSTAGRAM ASSEMBLAGE

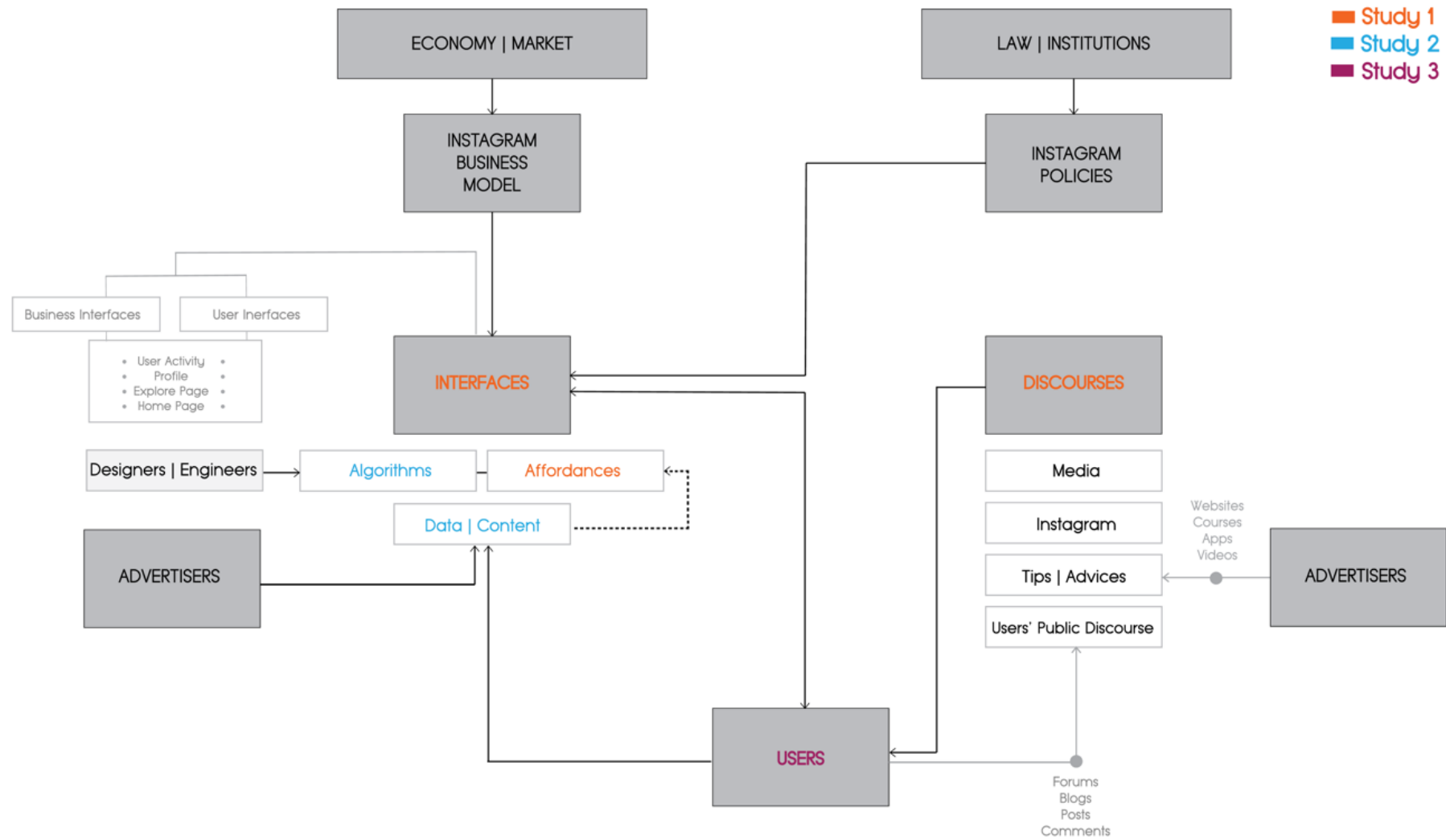


Figure 2 The Instagram Assemblage

First and foremost, the *economy and the market* constitute an entity that significantly affects the shaping of technology. This entity influences and shapes the Instagram *business model* and therefore the formation of the platform, given that it constitutes a corporation in the first place. Political economy “uncovers connections between ownership, corporate structures, finance, capital and market structures to show how economics affects technologies, politics, cultures and information” (Meehan, Mosco & Wasko, 1993, p. 105), and thus, we cannot neglect the economic aspect of platforms. According to van Dijck et al. (2018, p. 10) “business models in the context of platforms refer to the ways in which economic value gets created and captured.” In the case of Instagram, its primary source of revenue is digital targeted advertisements (Frier & Grand, 2020; Simon, 2022). In particular, the Instagram’s sponsored content can be found in several places such as on pictures, videos, carousels, stories and promoted posts (Bhasin, 2021). The platform enhances users’ experience driving them to stay longer on the platform in order to gather their data and most importantly offer them personalized advertisements. Secondly, Instagram gains profits by charging businesses who use its shop section by using the feature of checking out within the Instagram app² (Constine, 2019). For the time being, this feature is only available in the US, but Instagram plans to expand this possibility and make it available to more businesses across the world (see <https://business.instagram.com/shopping/checkout>).

Next, *laws and institutions* demarcate the wider range of platforms’ possibilities, defining their internal rules and policies – as, for example, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) which went into effect in 2018 in Europe. Social media platforms, such as Instagram, are constituted of social protocols, which are presented in complicated *policies* and are able to regulate user behavior by defining and limiting their potentials (van Dijck, 2013). The platforms’ administrators control these rules and modify them at any time, without the users’ awareness or prior consent (van Dijck, 2009). Accordingly, policies affect how a platform works and, to an extent, what users can do. Based on the *Common Sense Privacy Program*³, Instagram’s privacy settings was rated with 59% score which was accompanied by the tag “Warning” (see Common Sense Privacy Product, 2021). This score indicates the degree to which a company provides users with transparency regarding the privacy policies, the practices to protect their data and the additional work that users should do to make informed decisions about a digital service, such as Instagram (Common Sense Privacy Product, 2021). Instagram was rated very low (e.g. Data Sold parameter was rated with 30/100) in sections such as *individual control of data*, *data sold*, namely the preventing of data sale, and *ads and tracking*, namely the prohibition of the exploitation of users’ decision-making process. It is essential to mention that these areas are related to the platform’s business model and the company’s profit-

² This means that potential buyers can buy products and check out without leaving the Instagram platform.

³ Common Sense Privacy Program is an effort by the nonprofit organization Common Sense to bring transparency to privacy policies, safety and trust as well as protect the privacy of children (see <https://privacy.commonsense.org/>)

making. However, platforms are also restricted and bound by laws. For instance, the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) attempts to protect users and demarcate and restrict the actions of platforms in Europe.

Thirdly, as it has already been mentioned, it is quite important to explore the role of the *discourses* surrounding Instagram, as they may have an impact on users' perception about the platform. The Instagram discourses are formed through several sources, such as media, namely technological magazines and websites, and Instagram itself, through their websites, owners' and employees' interviews, statements etc. Additionally, advertisers can remarkably contribute to the conceptualization of Instagram in specific ways, as they provide tips and advice about the "correct" use of the platform through their books, courses, apps, websites and videos. Furthermore, users' public discourse, which is formed through forums, blogs, comments and posts, can affect the understanding of Instagram. All these sources of information and articulations play a vital role in how users perceive and understand the platform and their possibilities in it.

Another entity of the Instagram assemblage is the platform itself, constituted, at the time of writing, of four *interfaces*, the *Explore page*, *user's activity*, *main profile*, and *home page*. In addition, Instagram provides different interfaces for businesses and ordinary users, except from the *home page* and *Explore page* interfaces which are the same in both user types. The interfaces are constituted of algorithms and affordances, strongly related to their designers and engineers, as well as of data. Concerning the latter component, advertisers and users provide data fueling the platform with content. As Bucher and Helmond (2018) have stressed, there are different end-users of platforms, such as advertisers, developers and researchers. Therefore, *advertisers* constitute a separate and important entity of the assemblage, having separate interfaces while also providing their own data. Indeed, corporates and marketing agencies are able to affect the platform, as they dominate Instagram owning more than 200 million accounts (Smith, 2019). Lastly, *users* constitute a vital entity of the assemblage. They use and participate in the platform while simultaneously providing data and as a result, they can directly affect and define, to an extent, the platform's content and indirectly affect the algorithms in many cases (Bucher, 2017; Bucher & Helmond, 2018), as "people also do things to algorithms" (Bucher, 2017, p. 42).

The empirical study of the doctoral dissertation comprises of three separate studies that explore specific entities of the Instagram assemblage, aiming to investigate the power relations that articulated on the platform. Figure 2 also presents the entities that each of the three studies explores and focuses on. Therefore, drawing on the Instagram Assemblage, this doctoral research aims to investigate the following research questions:

1. *Which is the ideal use of the Instagram platform? How does Instagram function as a norm-(re)producing mechanism and how it constructs user subjectivities?*
2. *What power mechanisms does Instagram employ?*
3. *How do users react to these mechanisms and what do they think silently and invisibly?*

3.2 Research plan

Three primary studies have been held, in order to answer the master questions of this research and explore the different entities of the Instagram assemblage. The detailed methodological process of each study is presented in the respective chapters that follow (see Chapter 4, Chapter 5, Chapter 6). In this section, the research questions and an overview of the methodological process of each study are provided, presenting the overall research plan of the current doctoral dissertation.

3.2.1 #Study 1 User subjectivities on Instagram: The ideal Instagrammer

The first study focuses on the Instagram mobile application, its interfaces and affordances, aiming to investigate how Instagrammers' subjectivities are constructed, through the platform's design and surrounding discourses, drawing on the idea of the spectacle. Thus, based on Actor Network Theory, affordance theory, and on Debord's Society of the Spectacle, this study explores who the ideal user of the Instagram platform is, which subjectivities are inscribed in the platform and which are the norms that these subjectivities produce answering the following questions: *Who is the ideal user of the Instagram platform? Which norms does the platform produce or reinforce?* Each platform is constructed in a specific way to enact the ideal subjects of each one (Gehl, 2014), aiming to affect users' behavior and desires in a way conducive to the platform's economy. In addition, platforms and interfaces constitute the environment in which different actors are entangled, including values, design intentions and implementations, users' feedback, and discursive elements. Therefore, in order to explore the research questions mentioned above, a platform analysis has been held, focusing on and analyzing Instagram's interfaces. In addition, following the approach of *technography* (Bucher, 2012; Bucher, 2016b) as well as critical internet studies' approach, the relevant surrounding discourse has been taken into account and qualitatively analyzed to enrich the understanding of the Instagram conceptualization. In particular, the study focuses on two categories of discourses, firstly, on Instagram press releases, published in the company's Official Blog "Instagram Press"⁴, and, secondly, on web articles related to Instagram. The surrounding discourse conceptualizes a platform and produces and maintains certain truths, which contributes to the way users perceive a platform, its values, and norms (Beer, 2017). Thus, this conceptualization may affect the behavior of users inside the platform, and consequently, they

⁴ Almost a year after the analysis, the company renamed "The Instagram Press" to "About Instagram Official Blog."

may alter their interaction with the system influencing the platform's algorithms as well (Bucher, 2017; Rader & Gray, 2015).

3.2.2 #Study 2 Instagram Algorithms: De-coding Instagram as a Spectacle

The second study aims to examine Instagram algorithms in conjunction with the platform's content, exploring whether algorithms favor mainstream and soft topics generating a "filter bubble" of the spectacle, namely topics related to mainstream culture and commercial content. Instagram has become more algorithmic and increasingly computational (Carah & Shaul, 2016), as on March 15, 2016, the platform introduced a new algorithm personalizing content in users' account. In the context of Instagram, the number of studies which focus on personalization as well as and its implications for ordinary users are quite limited (see Section 5.2 for more details), while there are no studies investigating in depth the existence of a filter bubble on Instagram. Individuals devote a remarkable proportion of time and energy on Instagram. For instance, they "like" 4.2 billion photos on average per day (Aslam, 2019), while being exposed to a vast number of photographs. But is this content what they really care about the most? On Instagram one can find various topics of photographs, from pets, food, fashion themes to politics and social movements. On the one hand, popularity seems to play a significant role for a post to get promoted by algorithms (Carter, 2019, para. 24), while promotional accounts find ways to increase their visibility and become popular. On the other hand, Instagram is also a space where people express their political perspectives (Mahoney et al., 2016) and issues related to social movements and human rights. A significant question, thus, emerges: do these issues have equal representation? Approaching the platform as part of the *Society of the Spectacle* as well as a corporation aiming to raise its profits leads to the question whether Instagram promotes an ideal model of life, dominated by brands and strengthening consumerism. Taking everything into consideration, the main research questions of the second study are formed as follows: *Does the Instagram algorithm favor topics related to the spectacle? Does a filter bubble of spectacle exist?*

3.2.2.1 Audit studies

Three empirical algorithmic audit studies on Instagram have been held in order to investigate the aforementioned questions. These audit studies explore Instagram's recommendation system while also investigating whether the filter bubble phenomenon exists on the platform.

In particular, the second study of this Ph.D. dissertation focuses on a specific part of the platform, the Instagram *Explore page*. The audit studies can reveal how sensitive the algorithms are in users' behavior and history. Therefore, by having two accounts, one related to the spectacle (mainstream and commercial topics) and another one related to alternative topics, we can infer the dependency of the algorithms on the spectacle behavior.

The first audit study (Audit #1) intends to better understand the system by answering the following questions: *Does Instagram steer users towards specific kind of topics? If so, what kind of topics does Instagram promote by default?* In order to answer these queries I collected the recommendations made to users without previous history and then I analyzed them qualitatively. In particular, I constructed two new Instagram accounts, which I activated at different moments in time (Audit 1.1 and Audit 1.2), and I collected their recommendations (see Section 5.3 for more details). Through this process I explored what Instagram algorithms promote to users.

In the second audit (Audit #2), I focus specifically on the filter bubble assumption posing the following questions: *Does the Instagram algorithms favor soft topics? Does a filter bubble of spectacle exist?* In order to investigate these questions, two new Instagram profiles were employed. First, I constructed a profile focused on soft topics, mainstream culture and commercial content, by clicking, liking, commenting, producing content and adding profiles to the user's network. At the same time, I repeated this process with a second profile which focused on non-mainstream and non-commercial content, such as politics, social causes and movements. Both accounts' recommendations were collected and analyzed qualitatively.

The last audit (Audit #3) aims to answer the following questions: *Does a user's history affect the conceptualization of certain topics? Are users trapped into a filter bubble of Spectacle? How easy or difficult is it for a user to "pop" the filter bubble?* In the third study, I searched for specific keywords in the Instagram Explore page through both profiles. I gathered the results of each profile. In particular, I collected the recommended profile as well as the ranking of these recommendations. Then I analyzed the data through qualitative content analysis and I compared them as well. The aim of this process is to investigate how easy (or difficult) the platform renders for a user with a specific online behavior to come across specific non-mainstream, non-commercial content, namely whether the platform steers users toward soft, commercial and mainstream content. Second, through this design I explored how the algorithm conceptualizes specific topics, such as technology and feminism, according to particular user histories. Ultimately, it has been investigated whether users are trapped in a cultural "filter bubble" on Instagram, by comparing and analyzing system's recommendations.

3.2.3 #Study 3 Exploring users' perspective

Instagram, as commercial digital platforms often do, promotes a specific use of itself, enacting a subject position of the Instagram user (Gehl, 2014; Introna, 2016). The third and last study focuses on users, their perspectives, beliefs, feelings and practices. As it has already been mentioned (see Section 2.1.2), users can react and resist, developing their own tactics against the domination of power (Certeau, 1984). Accordingly, based on the findings of the two

previous studies of the research, as well as on the concepts of the society of the spectacle and de Certeau's approach to agency, the third empirical inquiry investigates users' agency regarding Instagrammers' subjectivities and platform's power as well as their implications on users' behavior, practices, beliefs and everyday life. In particular, I explore whether users adopt and follow the prescribed norms and Instagrammers' hegemonic subjectivity, as they have been formed through the platform analysis and the auditing studies, or negotiate and subvert them. Therefore, the following research questions are formed: *Do users adopt Instagram norms? Do users follow, subvert or negotiate the Instagrammer "in-scribed" or hegemonic subjectivity? How do they act and what do they think silently and invisibly?* In order to explore the research questions of this study, a qualitative study has been held, based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with "ordinary" Instagram users.

4. #Study 1: User subjectivities on Instagram: The ideal Instagrammer

4.1 Introduction to the study

“I am visible, I am an image – look! Look!”, Baudrillard commented back in 1993, pointing out that what mattered was the performance, an appearing act expressing “an extraversion without depth, a sort of self-promoting ingeniousness” (p. 23). What could possibly be said about Instagram’s constructed subjectivity 30 years later? I consider this question worth asking as, although Instagram has gradually risen to being one of the most popular social media platforms, with its users devoting a remarkable proportion of time to it, it has not been sufficiently inquired regarding which actions and norms it reinforces through its structural elements, potentially affecting users’ behavior. This lack appears crucial when considering that social media platforms are constructed bearing an ideal use of their software (through their design choices, affordances and discursive elements), in ways that can enact certain subject positions, the ideal subjects (Gehl, 2014) (see also Section 2.3 for more details).

Although the co-founder of Instagram, Kevin Systrom, claimed that the platform was created to inform people about the world (Kiss, 2013) and build communities (see <https://about.instagram.com/>), and although some users promote alternative topics through it (see Mahoney et al., 2016; Crowder, 2021), Instagram is, above all, a commercial platform aiming to raise its profits and attract businesses (see <https://business.instagram.com/>). Its commercial character is stressed as millions of businesses take advantage of it (see <https://business.instagram.com/>). In addition, there are indications that some users follow a specific pattern of behavior producing images that are promotional in a gentle and persistent manner to gain attention and reputation (Carah & Shaul, 2016) and others, the so-called influencers, follow and develop strategies to gain money (see Abidin, 2016b; Abidin, 2017). As has already been mentioned in the previous sections, the central role of images on Instagram, its conceptualization through the ideas of reputation, and its commercial nature leads to Guy Debord’s work of the *Society of the Spectacle*, raising questions regarding whether Instagram’s ideal subjectivities resonate with the idea of the spectacle. Instagram, as a space where millions of images are daily taken, shared and consumed, bears such a close resemblance to the spectacle that it is hard to ignore questions such as how life is being represented and whether these representations work their way through everyday life in the ways that Guy Debord imagined (or rather feared). This is the focus of this exploration: *Is Instagram a contemporary spectacle? What kind of subjectivities, needs and norms does it enact through its sociotechnical assemblage?*

In this study, in order to investigate the subjectivities constructed by Instagram I follow Actor Network Theory, perceiving platforms as assemblages of heterogeneous relations and actors that comprise of several human but also non-human elements through which ideal subjectivities

are enacted. Latour and Actor Network Theory draw attention to both material artefacts and human entities, stressing that non-human actors can determine and force specific actions (Latour, 1992). Thus, the entire design and affordances as well as discourses can enact the ideal use of the platform raising the question of whether it reproduces dominant societal norms or generates new (see Section 2.3 for more details). The current study takes up this challenge and seeks to explore how the Instagram platform constructs user subjectivities through its design and the surrounding discourses and whether it resonates with the idea of the spectacle.

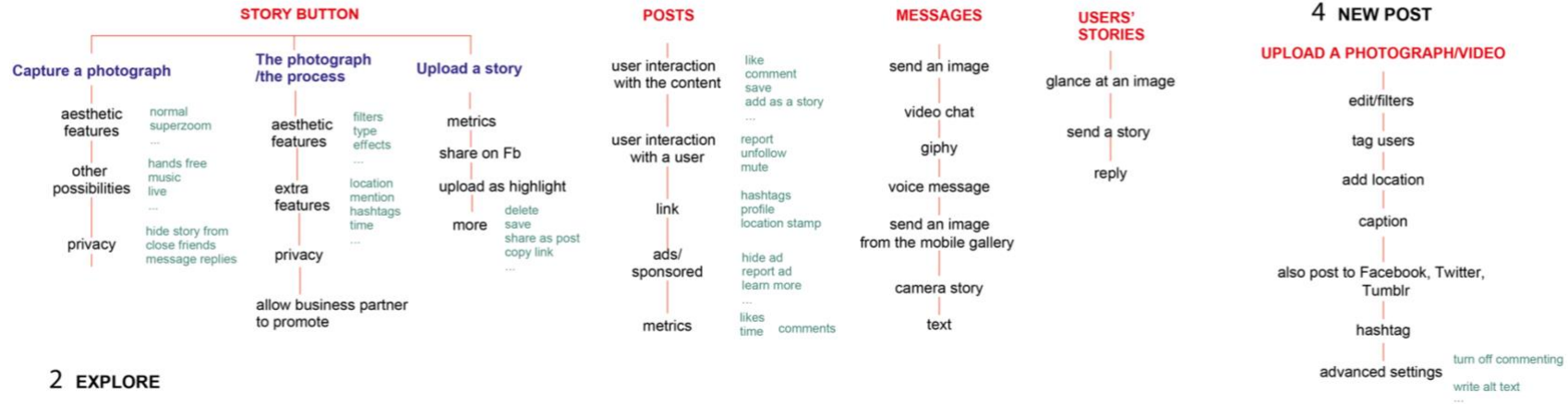
4.2 Methodology

Focusing on the Instagram platform and its interfaces, I investigate how the Instagrammer's subjectivity is constructed and whether it resonates with the idea of the spectacle – through the platform's design and the surrounding discourses. Who is the ideal user of Instagram? Which norms does the platform produce or reinforce?

To explore these questions, a platform analysis was held, a method which can explore the norms produced by affordances (see Stanfill, 2015). As Stanfill (2015, p. 1059) claimed, her approach offers “a tool for the new media research kit to improve our understanding of how norms for technologies and their users are produced and with what implications.” As a first step of this study, I identified the affordances of the Instagram platform. In particular, I focused on the feature oriented low-level affordances, namely the ones located in the materiality of the medium, such as buttons, features and screens (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), by navigating to several interfaces, looking for what is available for users, generating field notes and taking screenshots. Based on Latour, two questions were posed to locate the affordances of the platform: *Does it offer a possibility for action? Does it make any difference in any state of affairs?* This led to the creation of a diagram (Figure 3) depicting the main affordances of the platform in each interface, namely the *user activity*, *home*, *explore* and *profile* interfaces. In order for this diagram, or otherwise map, to be created, I reviewed several times my field notes. At the same time, I created several draft diagrams on paper and I also returned plenty of times to the platform to reevaluate the affordances. The various colours that have been used in the diagram indicate the different stages and order of affordances; the more one engages with an element of the platform, the more affordances they discover. For instance, when users enter their home page and tap the *story button* (red colour), they first encounter the interface where they can capture a picture (blue colour); in this interface, they can add, for instance, aesthetic features (black colour), such as the *normal feature* and the *superzoom feature* (green colour).

INSTAGRAM INTERFACES

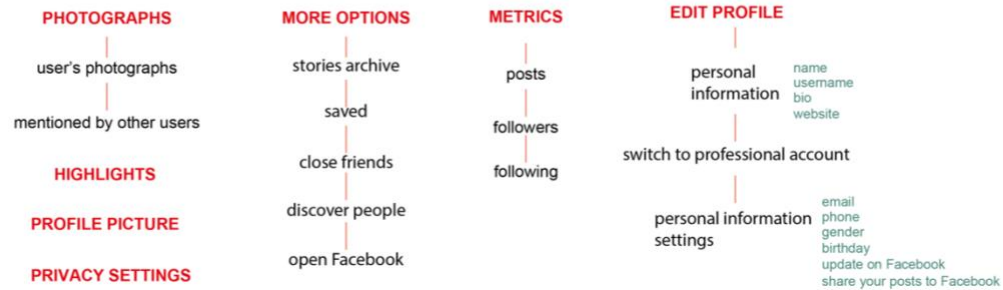
1 HOME



2 EXPLORE



3 PROFILE



5 USER ACTIVITY



Figure 3 Instagram interfaces and low-level affordances

Regarding the interfaces of Instagram, platforms usually change and are updated over time. Thus, it is significant to have an overview of how each interface functioned at the time of the analysis (August 2019 – December 2019) (see Figure 4). *Home page* constitutes the place where new posts and stories posted by one's followers are gathered. In addition, it also includes advertisements and profiles' recommendations. Secondly, *Explore page* displays personalized information in the form mainly of images and less frequently of videos, while also including recommended categories of topics, such as travel, style, or food. Furthermore, through the two abovementioned interfaces, one can be led to the *IGTV section*, which contains recommended videos lasting more than one minute. In addition, through the Explore page, one can navigate to the *shop section*, which, a couple of months after the interface analysis, was also available through the home page. The shop section includes products for sale along with brands' website links and recommendations for brands accounts. This interface is analyzed in more detail below. Thirdly, *user's profile* includes the profile owner's photographs, others' photographs in which the owner of the profile has been tagged, metrics (number of posts, followers and followees), highlighted photographs (which are stories chosen to be displayed permanently), a profile picture as well as the details that users choose to include, such as bio, email or even an emoji. These elements construct a user's profile on Instagram. Last but not least, the content of the *users' activity* interface is organized in different periods of time, like "today", "this week", "this month" and "earlier". Generally, it includes follow requests, profile suggestions to follow, tag suggestions based on users' likes but also information such as who has started to follow you and who likes your photograph. In addition, there was information regarding the activity of one's followers, such as what pictures your followers like⁵. The interface analysis started in August 2019 and was completed in December 2019; it includes the features presented above, which existed in the platform during this time period. The analysis of discourses surrounding the platform (see below for more details) was conducted in November 2019, including press releases from 2016 to 2019 and web articles from 2019. Therefore, acknowledging the evolutionary character of Instagram, it is important to be stressed that the whole analysis focuses on this time period. In addition, Instagram provides users with two options of accounts, namely they can set up a user profile or a business profile. Each one contains slightly different possibilities. The current research focuses on the latter, namely users' accounts, as its focus is "ordinary" users.

⁵ This feature was removed from the platform some months after the analysis.

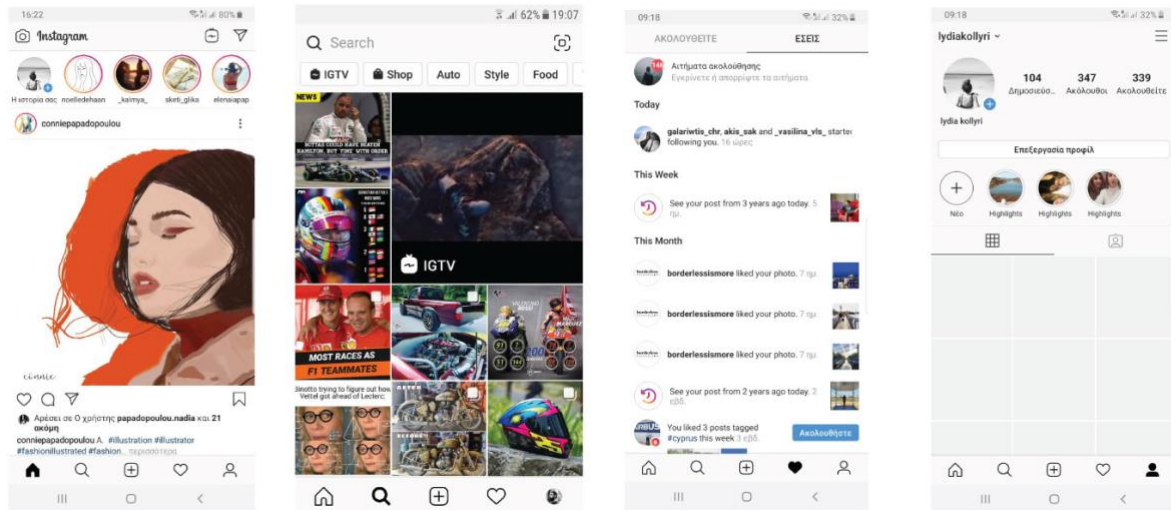


Figure 4 Instagram Interfaces (Home Page, Explore Page, User's Activity, User's Profile)

Next, based on the method of *discursive interface analysis* (Stanfill, 2015), I categorized and analyzed the affordances of the platform, which entails the analysis of functional, sensory and cognitive affordances (Stanfill, 2015). Firstly, *functional affordances* refer to the possibilities that are opened up (and others that are closed off) for users i.e. “what functionalities does the site have? What can you do with these?” (Stanfill, 2015, p. 1063). As Stanfill (2015) argues, although functional affordances are relatively straightforward, they do produce norms, as the demarcation of users’ behavior enables or prevents them from acting in a particular way. In particular, although users can act differently from what it might be expected, the affordances provided by a platform “make only some uses easy and normative” (Stanfill, 2015, p. 1063). Thus, we can see how this kind of affordances reveals the *productive power* of a platform also constraining users (see Foucault 1982; Bucher, 2012). Secondly, *cognitive affordances* are interrelated with the act of meaning making, and they refer to naming, labelling, site taglines and self-descriptions. These affordances define what a user does if she selects a specific option on the site, as they facilitate information processing (Stanfill, 2015). In addition, cognitive affordances identify users of a website in specific ways, since the platform may hail them as a man or as a fan, as Stanfill notes (2015, p. 1064). For instance, when there are two gender options on a platform or one gender option is the default one, the design may hail specific users. Thirdly, *sensory affordances* are close to an aesthetic analysis of the interface, referring to visibility, legibility or audibility. The design of a platform or a website, in the case of Stanfill’s study (2015), can indicate priorities for users. At the same time, it constitutes a self-identification of the platform concerning its purposes, and what users should care about, as it reflects “underlying assumptions about who and what sites are for” (Stanfill, 2015, p. 1064). In addition, it is vital to examine the page placement of platforms, as something located at the center of an interface can attract users’ attention much more than something located at the bottom, reinforcing the importance of this information. Sensory affordances, as Stanfill writes (2015, p. 1064), “may seem less discursively loaded, but making something stand out through

design choices apportion scarce attention to both reflect and reinforce assumptions and valuations.”

In this study, Stanfill’s method was combined and enriched by the approach of MacLeod and McArthur (2019), who analyzed the interface of Tinder and Bumble by utilizing a modification of the Avatar Affordances Framework. Their approach identifies the basic components of interface widgets, which are: *function, behavior, structure, identifier, default* and *convergence*. Thus, instead of analyzing Instagram as a whole, the analysis separately focused on each widget, element and ultimately affordance of the platform based on a combination of Stanfill’s as well as MacLeod and McArthur’s approaches. In particular, each affordance was analyzed regarding a. the functional dimension, by also identifying MacLeod and McArthur’s elements of function (what a user can do?), behavior (the action solicited by the widget) and structure (the technical description), b. sensory dimension and c. cognitive dimension, analyzing the notion of identifier (how users know what an element can do?) as well. In addition, convergence, and default components of each affordance were also described based on the perspective of MacLeod and McArthur (2019). The main widgets and affordances of the platform are depicted at Figure 3.

The diagram and the analysis of each affordance of the platform led to the creation of an excel file with four sheets for each Instagram interface, which is available online (<https://bit.ly/3S6pLOk>). In order to explicate the analysis of each affordance, the *Like widget* is presented below (Table 1) as an indicative illustration of the methodological process. In particular, *Table 1* represents a part of the analytical procedure, based on the aforementioned dimensions and components. This procedure results in a conclusion for each element (see the *overall meaning* in Table 1). Then, by combining and analyzing all the findings of each affordance, it was possible to explore the norms produced by the platform, define its inscribed subjectivities and understand how users’ behavior may be directed. The discourse analysis also contributed to that, as described below. The platform analysis was carried out on the Instagram mobile app, repeatedly visited, used and tested out.

	FUNCTIONAL			SENSORY	COGNITIVE			ANALYSIS
	<i>What can users do? What is the purpose?</i>	<i>The action solicited by the widget</i>	<i>The technical description</i>	<i>Aesthetic analysis</i>	<i>The text or icons that convey the element purpose</i>	<i>Is it connected with other platforms?</i>	<i>Predetermined choices</i>	
	Function	Behavior	Structure	Sensory	Identifier	Convergence	Default	Overall Meaning
Like button	Users are able to express their liking towards a photograph or a comment.	Users are expected to use the like button.	Users can double tap the picture or tap a white heart so as to express their liking.	There is a white heart below each picture and beside comments, which becomes red when someone touches it.	There are no indications as to how users can express their liking. There is the symbol of “heart” below the pictures, which is usually linked with the like action. The heart is white and becomes red when someone touches it.	No	White heart	In order for users to discover the like button, they should use their fingers properly (practice tap, swipe). <i>Instinctively use</i> of the platform.

Table 1 Analysis of the Like affordance as an indicative illustration

In addition, the surrounding discourses were taken into account, focusing on two categories of discourses. First and foremost, Instagram press releases, published in the company’s Official Blog “Instagram press” (<https://about.instagram.com/blog>), were analyzed in order to investigate how Instagram itself conceptualizes several tools, affordances and ideas. In this website, Instagram publishes several press releases, presenting new tools or introducing alterations on the platform. Overall, I selected 18 articles (see Appendix 1), which were most closely related to the research questions, and I analyzed them qualitatively via thematic analysis (see the indicative coding scheme of thematic analysis on Appendix 2). In Table 2, some indicative illustrations of the articles chosen are presented.

Author	Date	Title	Retrieved	Source
Instagram-press	March 19, 2019	Introducing Checkout on Instagram	November 20	https://instagram-press.com/blog/2019/03/19/instagram-checkout/
Instagram-press	November 01, 2018f	Sharing Your Election Day Excitement on Instagram	November 20	https://instagram-press.com/blog/2018/11/01/sharing-your-election-day-excitement-on-instagram/
Instagram-press	May 10, 2018f	Introducing the Emoji Slider	November 20	https://instagram-press.com/blog/2018/05/10/introducing-the-emoji-slider/
Instagram-press	September 28, 2017b	A New Face Filter to Customize Your Look and Transport Yourself to New Places	November 20	https://instagram-press.com/blog/2017/09/28/a-new-face-filter-to-customize-your-look-and-transport-yourself-to-new-places/

Table 2 Indicative illustration of the articles selected from the Instagram’s Official Blog

Secondly, given that search engines play an important role in coming across information, I sampled web articles related to Instagram use that were easily discoverable by an interested user through a generic (Google)⁶ search. To bypass personalized search results and trying to minimize any effects of personalization, I used Google Chrome and Mozilla Firefox, as these browsers allow users to conduct searches independently from users’ history⁷. I utilized the following keywords: *Instagram use*, *Instagram hashtags*, *Instagram story* and *Instagram Explore page*, in order to trace articles related to the platform use, vital tools and affordances of Instagram. Then, the results of the first Google page were collected and thoroughly scanned; lastly, the most relevant to the research questions were chosen, namely 20 articles (see

⁶ The Google search engine was chosen as it is the most used search engine worldwide, while it dominates the global search engine market (Statista, 2022a). In addition, the Google search engine accounted for 78.39% of the worldwide desktop and laptop searches in September 2021, while the second online search engine, Bing, accounted for 10,54% of the searches (Woodal, n.d), which is noteworthy difference.

⁷ A private window was used while all cookies, tracking content and cryptominers were blocked. The options “send websites a do not track signal” and “never remember my history” were selected. The data gathering was completed in one day, which contributes to depersonalized search results.

Appendix 3), and analyzed qualitatively. In particular, I analyzed the text of each recommended site, noting the most critical findings contributing to the conceptualization of Instagram tools as well as the platform itself (see the indicative coding scheme of thematic analysis on Appendix 4). Table 3 presents some illustrations of the results that I encountered by using the keyword “Instagram use” and chose to analyze. In addition, Figure 5 presents some of the Google results that appeared when I used the same keyword. At this point, it is worth mentioning that the analysis focused on search results, such as articles and website references; thus, videos were not collected and analyzed. The search engine results and recommendations were gathered in one day, on November 5. The entire process lasted for one month and took place in November 2019.

Keyword	Author/ Company	Date	Title	Retrieved	Source
Instagram hashtags	all-hashtag	n.d	Top hashtags. Increase your reach by using top hashtags in your posts.	November, 5	https://www.all-hashtag.com/top-hashtags.php
	Hashtags for like	n.d	Tools to grow your Instagram	November, 5	https://www.hashtagsforlikes.co/
	A. Gotter	Nov. 2019	Instagram Hashtags: How to Find the Most Popular Hashtags and Connect with New Followers	November, 5	https://www.shopify.com/blog/instagram-hashtags
Instagram Use	C. Forsey	Nov. 2019	How to Use Instagram: A Beginner's Guide	November, 5	https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/how-to-use-instagram
	E. Moreau	Sept. 2019	What Is Instagram, Anyway? Here's what Instagram is all about and how people are using it	November, 5	https://www.lifewire.com/what-is-instagram-3486316
	E. Moreau	Sept. 2019	11 Instagram Tips for Beginners Follow these essential tips when getting started on Instagram	November, 5	https://www.lifewire.com/instagram-tips-for-beginners-3485872

Table 3 Indicative Illustrations of the articles gathered from the search engines results

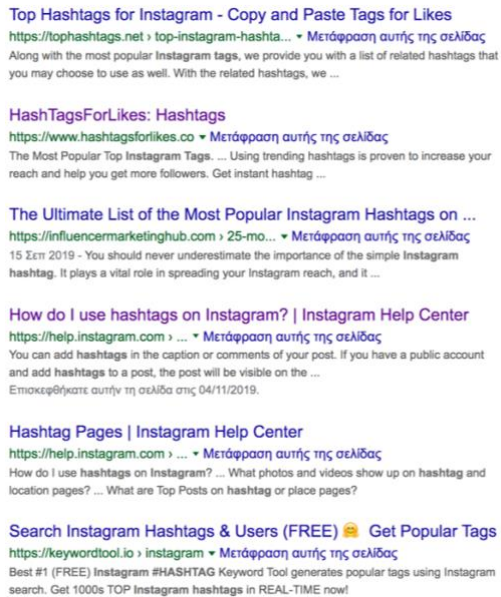


Figure 5 Google results using the keyword “Instagram Hashtags”

The interface analysis and the analysis of the discourses surrounding the platform aim to explore in which directions designers drive users and which norms they inscribe in the Instagram design. However, it should be mentioned that some ethical concerns are raised as this method cannot reveal the struggles behind these decisions and the actual intentions of designers. This method is based on the final outcome, namely the platform’s structure, tools, and their conceptualization, but it is acknowledged that it does not include and provide designers’ perspective.

4.3 Findings

The findings resulted from both the interface analysis and the thematic analysis of the articles. Four categories of user subjectivities were identified: 1. the *passive recipient of content* 2. the *producer of spectacular content* 3. the *sociable user* and 4. the *consumer of commodities and aspiring influencers (prospective entrepreneurs)*. These discursive categories indicate how users are *in-scribed*, how their needs and *prescribed* actions are constructed and to which directions users are steered, while suggesting how their everyday life may be affected and altered. Nonetheless, it is vital to highlight that although platforms may steer the behavior of users, we do not know what users do when they encounter the strategies of power on the web.

4.3.1 The passive recipient of content

4.3.1.1 Endless and constantly renewed content

Instagram acts like a “companion” (see Karakayali, Kostem & Galip, 2018), being there at all times to provide endless updated material and fulfil the need of finding something new and

intriguing. Based on its low-level affordances, Instagram seems to have been designed in such a way as to trigger prolonged consumption, as a multitude of tools exist urging individuals to consume more and more content.

First and foremost, users do not encounter posts created only by their followers; new material always emerge through interfaces designed especially for that purpose. The *Explore page* and the *IGTV section* is exactly to display unseen images and videos. This content is endless – it is always renewed when users scroll up. In addition, since 2016 Instagram has incorporated in the platform personalized algorithms, whose aim is to “show the moments we believe you will care about the most” (Instagram, 2016a), rendering the content more enticing for users. Furthermore, according to O’ Meara (2019, p. 1), the phrase that Instagram used to introduce its personalization algorithms reflects the “users as consumers of content” priority.

Users are offered endless opportunities to come across new images. Apart from these sections, users can find new content (stories, posts and personalized advertisements), in their *home interface*. The functionality of these interfaces reinforces the continuous consumption of “newness” (Grosser, 2014), as older images are replaced by recent ones. When a user scrolls up, the images are usually refreshed and substituted by new ones. In fact, it becomes very difficult, almost impossible, to come across a certain image again in a subsequent visit to Instagram or after a scroll up. In fact, in order for a user to reencounter an image, their action is required. Users can *save* images by pressing a symbol at the right bottom corner of an image. This symbol is not easy for a user to notice, as its size is small. Through that option, they can encounter the saved posts again without fearing that they may disappear. In addition, *stories’* layout and design contribute to the flitting encounter of content: at the exact time a story gets seen, it is automatically switched with another one. In addition, usually, when a user watches three stories in a row, then an advertisement is displayed. Thus, if users do not stop seeing stories, the Instagram’s design will lead them to a continuous consumption of photographs and advertisements. Timestamps are present in all content, which creates the feeling that one may miss something “important” if one leaves the platform for long (see Grosser, 2014, p. 8). Posts contain elements, such as profile names, sometimes hashtags, and location stamps, that are active links leading to new sources of fresh content. Thus, users can potentially find new accounts or hashtags to follow, resulting in more upcoming posts and stories on their home interface. Moreover, users can *mute* Instagram profiles to avoid receiving content from them. By choosing this, users render the content of specific accounts invisible to them. This affordance seems to cede control to users as they can manipulate their data feed. However, this control is limited, as they cannot choose what to see but solely what they do not want to see, while algorithms are still responsible for determining and displaying the rest of the content. At the same time, this affordance can be seen as a way for algorithms to gather more data about users’ preferences and offer them more expedited personalized recommendations. In addition, users may feel they have control of their feed while a more inviting environment for them is

created, which can make them stay longer on the platform consuming images. This feature is not apparent when one glances at a post, as users should first notice the three small dots at the right corner of an image and then press to find the *mute* option.

Instagram users come to know that they can always find new and interesting content on the platform being driven to visit Instagram repeatedly. According to the available statistics, this strategy seems to work, as users spend an average of 53 minutes per day on Instagram (Broadbandsearch, n.d), which is higher than the average time people spend on the video-based platform YouTube (Ceci, 2022).

4.3.1.2 Content for passive consumption

The excessive amounts of content along with the Instagram design's prods invoke users to consume passively. When one tries to sign up for the first time on Instagram, they will notice the phrase: "*Sign up to see photos and videos from your friends.*" This implies a state of passivity and a call for consumption rather than production. The way in which Instagram content (images and videos) are promoted and conceptualized intensifies the drive to consume. As Carah and Shaul (2016, p. 72) claimed,

Instagram is a media device designed for glancing, directed by the swiping and tapping of the user's finger on the screen of their smartphone. The continuous flow and small size of the images seem to work against the possibility that the content could be open to contemplative viewing. The insertion of each individual image or short video into a potentially endless number of differently curated or algorithmically generated feeds of content works against the possibility of users constructing a narrative.

In fact, the platform does not favor a contemplative view of images, but it *inscribes* and propels a repetitive, brief and fleeting one. In particular, the size of photographs is quite small, and users cannot save them in their mobile devices. Hence, they are "locked in" Instagram, as they cannot easily use them in other ways or in other platforms. At the same time, the *zoom* function is restricted on posts, so users cannot easily enlarge an image, and this function is forbidden on *stories*. Furthermore, each *story* lasts only for a few seconds before another one appears, preventing reflection on them, while it is very difficult to detect the same images in an always renewed environment. Thus, users are being motivated to massively consume more and more content rather than ponder over it. The inscribed Instagram users are anticipated to espouse a fleeting and passive consumption, restricted to specific quick interactions, such as liking. In addition, an indication of the most widespread topics on Instagram is its most popular categories, the top five of which, at the time of writing, are fashion, food, design, travel and fitness while most popular hashtags are #love, #instagood #photooftheday, #fashion and #beautiful (Puttkamer, 2019; Paul, 2019). Therefore, it seems that even the promoted and most

popular content itself facilitates mindless consumption, as for instance, it is much easier for one to scroll and glance at 50 photographs of pizzas and dogs compared to meticulous reading and consideration of political news.

4.3.1.3 *“Trained” towards a repetitive and instinctive use*

Instagram runs chiefly on mobile phones, exploiting their major advantages. In particular, it “trains” users to make specific movements with their fingers in order to implement several actions, which may lead to an instinctive use of the platform. Many of the existing affordances are hidden as there is no identifier to confirm their existence. For instance, there are no identifiers explaining how one can add a location stamp or a filter to a story or how one can upload a photograph from a mobile phone’s gallery. Thus, users must devote time to the platform and start using appropriate and specific gestures to investigate all *hidden* possibilities. In fact, Instagram also builds on users’ experience and habits on other platforms (social media or social messaging) e.g. users may know that when they want to like one’s picture they can tap the heart symbol, as it happens on Tinder. Thus, all these physical motions acquire strong social meanings and are equated with social practices (cf. Tinder “swipe”). On Instagram, we can argue that users are being “trained” to follow specific motions, attuned to the habitual ones of a smartphone. Hence, they are urged to perform repetitive movements that may result in an instinctive use of the platform, which favors prolonged consumption and by extent is conducive to platform’s financial interests.

Furthermore, passive and standardized actions are promoted. One can press the like button easily through a quick double-tap on an image. Even comments (an affordance that typically involves a higher degree of expression and engagement) are accompanied by predetermined responses (two happy emojis) that a user can quickly and easily choose and move to the next image. In addition, given that Instagram runs on smartphones, notifications usually come up, such as when a user uploads an image after a long time, reminding users that the platform is always there, on their mobile, for scrolling and consumption. Although we do not know whether users espouse this position, the Instagram platform seems to have been designed in a way that passive consumption can easily be embraced.

4.3.2 The producer of spectacular content

One of the most significant traits of Instagrammers is their role as producers. Users are motivated to expose their everyday moments generating specific content with specific characteristics. Focusing on the design of the platform, the story button is a fundamental feature, given that it constitutes one of the two possibilities for content production and approximately 500 million people use the story feature on Instagram every day (Wise, 2022). A story is visible only for 24 hours and then it disappears. The platform promotes it, as

identifiers of it appear in four different places in the platform (two in the home page, one in users' profile, one in the message section). The very design of this button enables the penetration of the platform into everyday life. First, the story button provides a camera mode through which one can directly capture and upload a story without leaving the platform, facilitating and, thus, intensifying this process. In addition, the option of uploading a photograph from the mobile's gallery is hidden, as users do not have any identifiers of the existence of this affordance. Thus, they should investigate it themselves by properly moving their finger and navigating in the platform. Comparing this to the *post upload* button, the option to use a photograph which has been already taken is quite obvious. Therefore, story is a faster and more direct process of uploading an image, while users are steered to take new photographs, promoting the exposure of instantaneous moments. Furthermore, a story not only has a short public lifespan, but also its metrics (number of views, names of the followers who viewed the story and followers' messages) are absent from public view, as only the images' owner has access to them. Thus, users are enabled to upload more trivial and everyday moments without thinking it much, since they do not have to worry about the feedback they may receive (or not). This can also lure the hesitant users to produce content on the platform, offering them a sense of security. Therefore, the design of this feature prescribes users' specific behaviors, namely uploading ordinary moments, such as while they are shopping for their dinner on the supermarket, eating their meals or even personal ones, such as a funny moment with friends. Indeed, the *all#ashtags* website mentions (All#ashtag, n.d): "Who doesn't know this on Instagram? You go out to eat and want to share your food with the whole world." But why do users want to share such a trivial moment of their everyday life and share their meal? This was also the question in 2014 when couples started to share their private moments by capturing selfies and using the *#aftersex* hashtag, also making it a trend on the platform that year (Radulova, 2014). Users are driven to get used to the exposure of everyday life on Instagram, firstly as consumers and secondly as producers, intensifying the normalization of online sharing of personal or even private life. Thus, it can become part of routine, which according to Giddens (1984) has the power to build institutions. In addition, as Willson (2017, p. 138) claimed, when activities and routines are replicated by many people on a daily basis "practices become normalised or naturalised, usually enacted with minimal thought and often rendered invisible or in the background (or at the very least as largely unquestioned)." The marketing agency Hubstop describes the story tool as follows: "users often post more casual and candid videos and images, offering glimpses into their everyday lives" such as a candid video of a stadium singing (Forsey, 2019). As the company itself has stated, the story tool is "a way to share all the moments of your day" (Instagram, 2016b). Thus, on the one hand, everyday life may be "celebrated," but on the other hand, it may also be commercialized.

Second, the Instagram producer is urged to follow specific guidelines concerning content production, which can lead to its standardization. Instagram offers numerous choices of filters and features which can be applied to a photograph. Based on aesthetic interventions, some of

them offer a specific atmosphere, such as the “New York” and “Tokyo” filters. In addition, the *upload a photograph* tool also provides users with a multitude of filters and various possibilities regarding the editing of their photo, such as the correction of brightness, temperature and contrast. The almost endless options of aesthetic intervention aim at the ideal representation of each image. The use of filters is strongly promoted by marketing agencies, as a way to perfect Instagram photographs (see Burgett, 2018; Moreau, 2019a; Moreau, 2019b), also by using additional editing apps for even better results (see Burgett, 2018). Thus, the devotion of time and energy to the improvement of images is constructed as essential in the Instagram realm. Furthermore, the *story* tool is brimful with features adding funny notes to each *story*. For instance, there are special effects enlarging one’s mouth or transforming one’s self to an alien or a cute rabbit. In addition, there are other possibilities, such as the *boomerang* or *superzoom* with a fire effect option, which zooms in while fires show up. Instagram seems to propel a specific type of content production related to superficial funny moments that do not require much contemplation, in addition to atmospheric, beautiful pictures. Indeed, it would be weird were someone to use the alien effect in order to state their opinion regarding the financial crisis. The company, in its press releases (Instagram, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018d), implicitly stresses an orientation towards specific aesthetics and topics. The introduction of several tools is accompanied by photographs depicting dogs, food and funny faces (see Figure 6, Figure 7), conceptualizing the use of each one in specific ways.

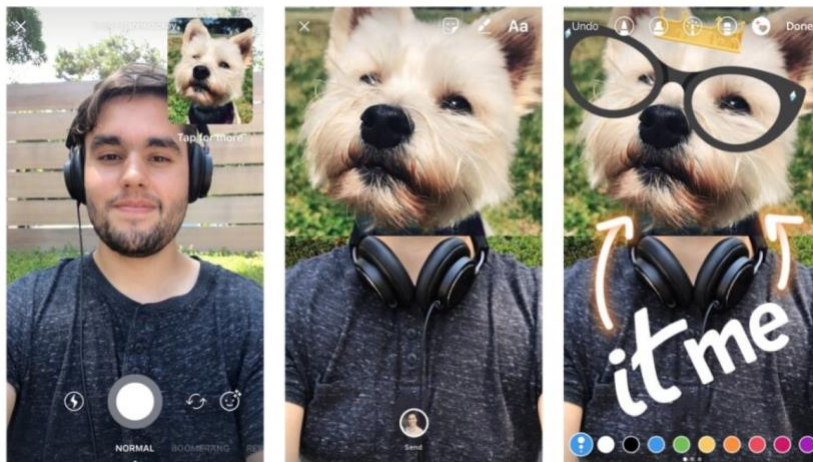


Figure 6 The introduction of the *split-screen reply tool* by Instagram



Figure 7 The introduction of the repost tool by Instagram

On the other hand, engagement with political issues is not absent from Instagram strategies. In 2018 a tool was introduced for people in the USA in order to share their voting experience on Instagram (see Instagram, 2018f), containing related stickers. In fact, users could take a selfie and then add an “I voted” sticker on their photographs and upload it as a story. These stories would appear at the beginning of their friends’ recommendations on the story bar. Still, this option raises concerns regarding the motives triggering the action of voting. Voting should be a responsible decision that comes after deep thought and reflection, as it constitutes an opportunity for citizens to participate in democracy. It can be said that these stickers capitalize the desire of people, especially young ones, to be seen and exposed and maybe to become participants in a massive online action. Although users may be driven to the ballot, the actual conceptualization of the voting act is unclear. The emphasis is put on the final outcome, namely the display of the act, which may contribute to the construction of an online profile and self. However, at the same time, Instagram reminds users that through the platform, they can also get involved with topics related to politics and not only with everyday content. Thus, it is argued that the involvement of Instagram with this topic and its actual impact is rather vague.

The standardization of users’ creations is significantly urged by the metrics of the platform as well as by the surrounding discourses, promoting the idea of acquiring popularity and fame. Hence, another attribute is ascribed to Instagram producers; they should be (made) popular. First and foremost, the platform is full of metrics, such as number of views, comments, likes, followers, followees, time stamps, etc. Instagram users, and especially digital workers, are constantly confronted with statistics and measurements of their own fame which possibly leads to a pursuit of reputation and attention, as the existence of metrics intensifies the desire for even more numbers (Grosser, 2014). Thus, users are exhorted to find ways to increase their

numerical data, as reputation is visible, tangible and measurable (Gandini, 2016), and produce more content with specific terms, while participation becomes a powerful means for profit-making for the platform. The solutions to the desire for more metrics come as tips and advice offered mainly by marketing agencies, which often conceptualize the use of Instagram as a pursuit of popularity (see Forsey, 2019; Burgett, 2018; Moreau, 2019b). The advice interferes with the aesthetics of images and the management of elements such as the frequency and time of posting, hashtag selection and use of location stamps.

The articles “11 Instagram Tips for Beginners, follow these essential tips when getting started on Instagram” (Moreau, 2019b) and “How to Use Instagram: A Beginner’s Guide” (Forsey, 2019) are addressed to beginner users who want to be introduced to the use of the platform. Both articles conceptualize the Instagram use as a pursuit of popularity and attention, while the article “How to use Instagram” (Burgett, 2018) concludes with the subtitle “On your way to Insta fame.” These articles explain to their readers that, should users want to increase their reach and get more likes, they should firstly use the appropriate and most popular hashtags in their posts (Canning, 2019; Moreau, 2019b). Taking a closer look at them, the most popular (such as #love, #instagood, #photooftheday, #fashion, #beautiful, #happy, #cute, etc.) offer hints regarding which topics one should exploit in order to raise their popularity. Therefore, users are triggered to create specific content that most users share to gain fame. However, it should be mentioned that users can use their own hashtags, as it is not necessary to choose a hashtag from the existing ones; being able to describe their topics however they want or even start a trend. What is more, the *explore interface* is suggested as a place for “inspiration”, so that one “stay[s] on top of the latest Instagram trends” (Moreau, 2019b), potentially leading to a reproduction of certain topics and styles. According to marketing advice from articles, posts should look diverse, “evoke some kind of emotion” (Moreau, 2019b) and be high quality and colorful pictures (Forsey, 2019). In addition, an article (Canning, 2019) suggests videos as the best way to attract followers, proposing to users to turn the photographic content into videos, as it can possibly be ranked higher than an image. Applications automatically creating videos for users’ feed or stories without too much hassle and energy by individuals are also recommended (see Canning, 2019), standardizing even more the creative process. In addition, users are motivated to visit Instagram *themes*, which are profiles with specific aesthetics regarding colors, atmosphere, lines, filters, etc., in order to find “inspiration” (see Forsey, 2019). In fact, users are urged to imitate the pictures of these profiles reproducing their specific aesthetic patterns. More specifically, the article’s advice regarding themes is that a user’s profile should be consistent and unvarying, namely that all the pictures should share a common aesthetic (Forsey, 2019). For instance, it is proposed to users to choose one aesthetically pleasing and calm colour that all their pictures would share, such pink. A good illustration of the standardization of the creative process through the reproduction of popular aesthetics is presented via the Instagram profile “insta_repeat” (www.instagram.com/insta_repeat/). This account displays almost identical Instagram photographs taken by different users, but sharing

the same subject, concept and aesthetics, namely angle, filters and sometimes editing (see Figure 8). The profile owner adopts a critical standpoint characterizing the images as *simulacra* (see Marchese, 2018). This observed repetition of a specific (usually appealing) lifestyle is a result of users being channelled to reproducing popular subjects and aesthetics that usually form what is called *Instagrammable* content, which according to the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d) is the content that is “attractive or interesting enough to be suitable for photographing and posting on the social media service Instagram.” Repetition is promoted instead of originality and creativity, as the latter may risk users’ fame and reputation.

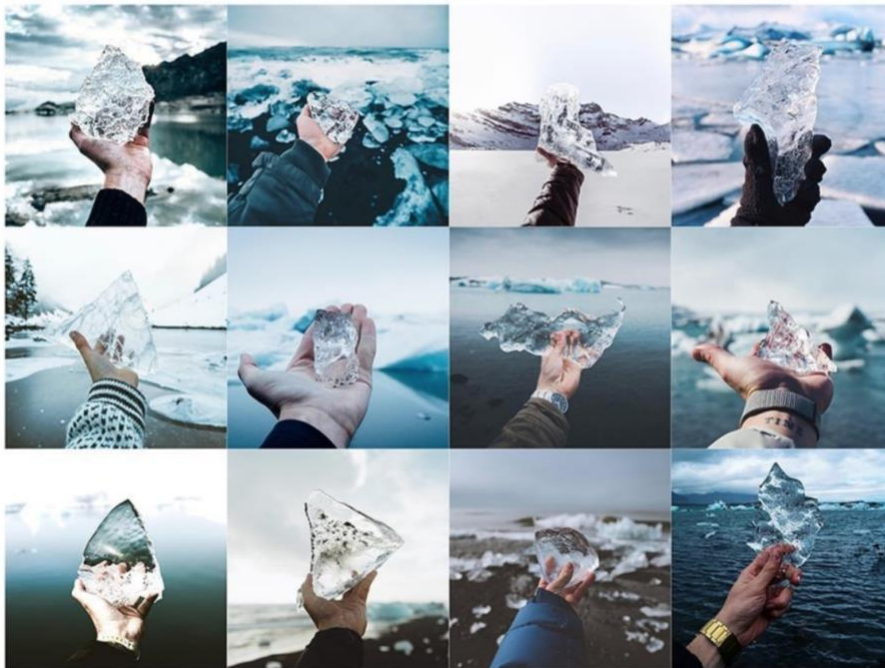


Figure 8 Image shared by the “insta_repeat” account

Therefore, whereas the platform is supposedly a space where people can express their creative inclinations, in practice creative spirit is not what is being rewarded. Users are exposed to step-by-step strategies for the creation of a successful and popular account, standardizing actions and content in the platform. In addition, all these tools and the way they are conceptualized highlight the significance of the representation of an “ideal image.” The original photograph is the starting canvas for users to be “upgraded,” according to the platform, through the plethora of features, in order to represent the “best version” of them. For instance, by brightening a photograph, one can display a wonderful sunny atmosphere full of light, even if they had experienced a gloomy one. The Instagram producer is constructed as a user striving to upload the perfect content, closely resembling an influencer subjectivity, who pays attention to metrics, popularity and aesthetics in order to gain fame and/or profit. The endless instructions by the various marketing agencies are dedicated to show users the way and the steps towards the best possible use of Instagram so as to construct the perfect online presence.

4.3.3 The sociable user

Instagram users are prescribed to be part of a social network, constituting *sociable* individuals. Instagram's design promotes a guided communication process while the surrounding discourses commodify human interaction, as analyzed below.

Instagram conceptualizes its tools as a means for users to feel closer to their friends and followers, by repeatedly evoking the words “community” and “friends” (see Instagram, 2018d; Instagram, 2018c; Instagram, 2017a; Instagram, 2018d). For instance, the press releases that introduced the video chat tool, and the emoji slider tool mentioned accordingly: “Your friends are already on Instagram, and with video chat, you can seamlessly contact” (Instagram, 2018c); “The emoji slider lets you ask more nuanced questions when you want to find out how your friends feel about something” (Instagram, 2018f). In addition, another article mentioned: “Instagram Stories is now used by 400 million every day, and we're excited to give our community new ways to feel closer to their friends and followers” (Instagram, 2018e). Indeed, Instagram provides several tools and affordances aiming to trigger interaction among individuals. The most common ones are *comments* and *likes*, while other possibilities have also been introduced, such as the possibility to conduct a *poll* or ask a public *question* through Instagram stories. Furthermore, texts, photographs, and recorded voice messages can be exchanged on the platform via personal messages in a respective section. In addition, users can make video calls or react to stories by sending emojis, texts or photographs. Nonetheless, the communication process is steered and conceptualized in a specific way.

The message section is not promoted as much as in other platforms e.g. users could not send messages via Instagram on their computers, at the time of the analysis. Furthermore, the possibility of messaging is restricted on a specific section, e.g. users cannot send a message while scrolling on their wall, as it is possible on other platforms such as Facebook. This signifies that extended verbal interaction is not a priority for the platform; rather, quick answers seem to be more wanted and promoted. Comments and story reactions are accompanied by predetermined responses, positive emojis, which are noticeably emerging when someone tries to use these tools. For instance, should one try to respond to a story, six stickers will immediately show up depicting hearts, confetti, happy and surprised yellow faces. Given the endless content of Instagram, these recommended quick reactions can easily be embraced by users in order to save time. In addition, these options are placed in an obvious central spot in the platform, urging users to choose them and disposing them towards positive reactions. According to Stanfill (2015, p. 1064), when the design of an interface makes something stand out, it also “reinforce[s] the importance of this information to users.” Thus, users are invoked to act in a specific way that does not require reflection and personal expression. Instagram gathers countless standardized responses of hearts and happy face stickers, while simultaneously users are active participants in the platform. As a matter of fact, predetermined

responses are not uniquely applied by Instagram but belong to a greater communicative culture of social media mutually reinforcing them. In general, Instagram is based on visual content, which actively limits possibilities for verbal communication. Short repetitive answers are promoted instead of text that may trigger an actual conversation.

According to Instagram, the platform constitutes a community assisting users in starting conversations with their friends so that they “get to know each other better” (Instagram, 2018b). *Polls* and *question stickers* in *stories* can be considered an efficient way of communication, as users call for replies through their stories. By using the *poll* tool, users make a statement while providing their followers with the answers “yes” or “no” or they can customize the answers (see Instagram, 2017c), and let them vote. Then, they can find their followers’ responses in the private story’s viewer list. The *question tool* functions in the same way, but answers are open and not predetermined. In Instagram’s press releases these tools are conceptualized as a way to share trivial concerns. For instance, an Instagram article mentions: “whether you’re trying to plan tomorrow’s outfit, choosing which class to take or figuring out where to go for dinner, now it’s easy to share a two-option poll right in your story” (Instagram, 2017b). In addition, the *poll* tool is introduced by a picture depicting a cheerful girl holding two donuts and asking “which one?”, the possible answers are “plain” or “sprinkles” (see Figure 9). The *question tool* is accompanied by another picture with a girl together with the question, “waiting for the bus, ask me questions,” as well as the answer, “Omg, love your haircut! What made you do it?” (see Figure 10). Instagram explicitly associates these tools with topics related to trivial moments and concerns, like the donut choice. In the first case, the answers are presented through metrics, while in the second case, the tool seems to foster short answers and questions. The platform is promoted as a place where people get to know each other better, yet the very conceptualization of these interactive tools steer users towards phatic communication. However, although the platform does not drive users towards deep conversations, the promoted topics, namely content related to trivial concerns and interests such as the school outfit, can be discussed with other Instagram users. Therefore, the platform gives prominence to everyday moments that users care about and otherwise might neglect.

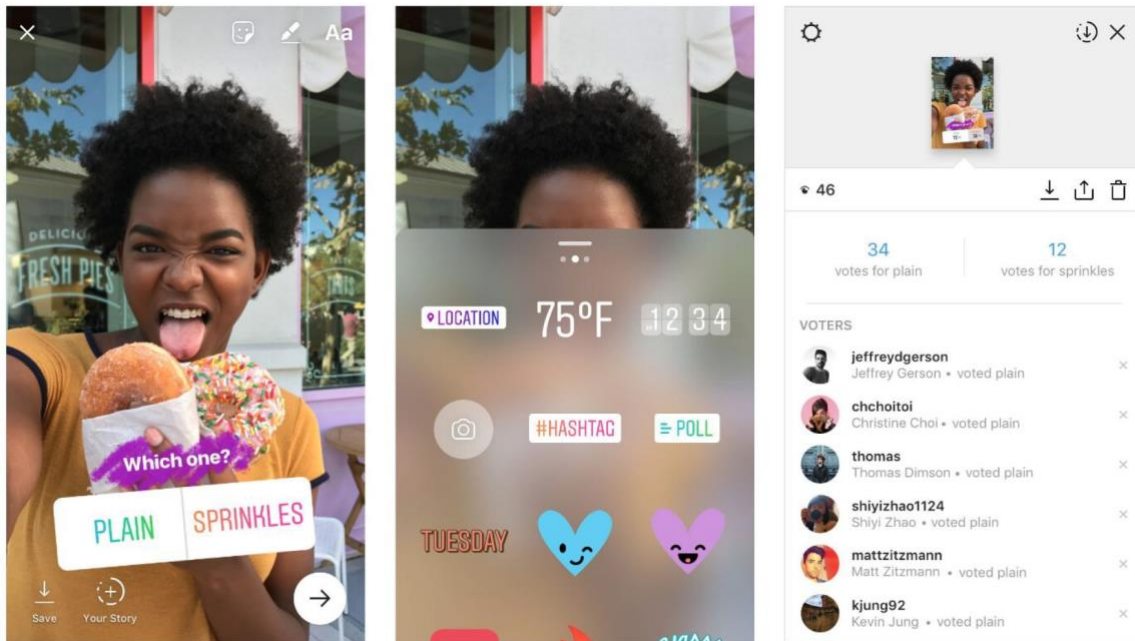


Figure 9 The introduction of the poll tool by Instagram

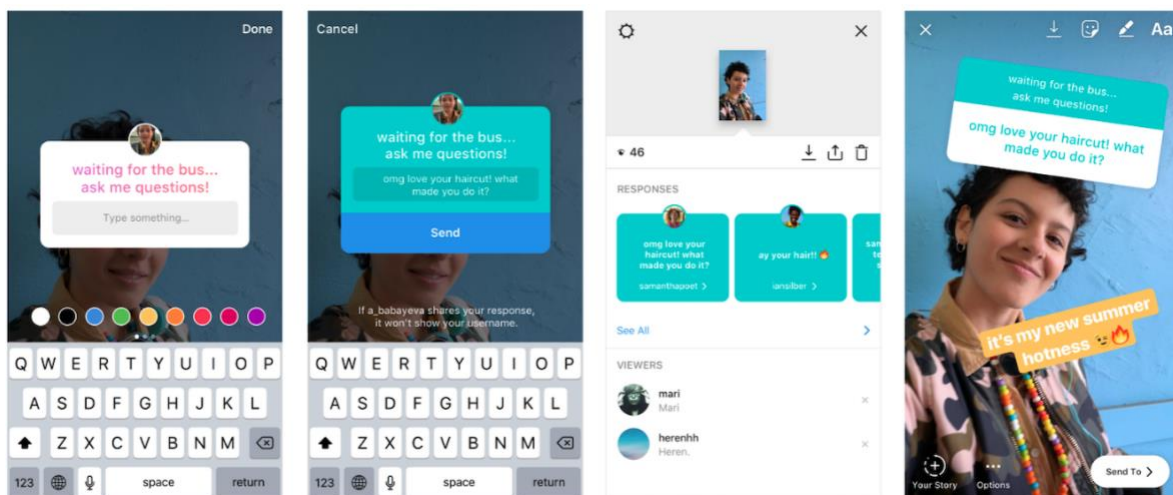


Figure 10 The introduction of the question tool by Instagram

Moreover, Instagram relationships are strongly commercialized. Several articles motivate users to be sociable, as a way to acquire and retain their fame by making the other users engage with their account and receiving likes and comments. Metrics dominate the platform, as each profile's value is estimated through likes, comments and followers. According to Moreau (2019b):

Never ignore your most loyal followers who regularly like and comment on your photos! That's a surefire way to eventually drive people away. Instead, you want to make your followers feel valued. Reply to their comments or even go check out their account and like a few of their photos.

This piece of advice comes from an article entitled “11 Instagram Tips for Beginners”, while this extract was under the title “Interact with your Followers.” Thus, from the very start of Instagram use, human relationships are “advertised” as vital means of fame, constituting pseudo-relations, as the true motive behind them is invoked to be the establishment of a network that brings numbers and popularity. According to this article, a user may like an image solely in order to create a fake connection and receive back a precious like. Human associations are transformed into a façade hiding their commercial foundation and resembling self-branding techniques dedicated to acquiring reputation. As Alessandro Gandini (2016a, p. 124) has mentioned, “self-branding becomes a form of ‘digital work’ as an investment in social relationships with an expected return, which points at the acquisition of a reputation.” This phenomenon is also confirmed by some of the most popular Instagram hashtags, such as like for like (#l4l) and follow for follow (#f4f) (Cotter, 2019). When a user utilizes, for instance, the like for like hashtag under a post, it automatically means that when another user likes this post, he/she should like back this account’s photographs, no matter the content. Although this practice of mutual liking indicates the commodification of human relationships, it should be mentioned that some influencers have taken advantage of these relations so as to resist Instagram algorithms, make them prioritize their content and take control over the way they are presented to others (O’ Meara, 2019). Therefore, as has already been mentioned, the investigation of users’ practices is vital in order to understand how they actually interact with the platform.

All things considered, Instagram is a platform that is based on *sociability*, functioning as an incentive and lure for people to upload and consume. Instagram urges users to follow specific conventions, conceptualizing the communication process and sociability in specific ways. As noted above, predetermined, positive, and sometimes instinctive responses, emojis, quick answers and engagement with trivial topics describe Instagram’s promoted interaction choices. In addition, users may be tempted to establish an online connection with the purpose of increasing their numerical value, embracing the tactics of influencers.

4.3.4 Consumer of commodities and aspiring influencers (prospective entrepreneurs)

Brands and shopping constitute essential components of the platform’s structure, even if this is not explicitly mentioned. The ideal Instagrammer is induced to embrace these ideas and become a *product consumer* and sometimes an *entrepreneur* or otherwise an *influencer*.

Being part of Instagram means that one receives numerous advertisements when logging in. Sponsored stories, frequently accompanied by a button “shop now,” are emerging when one watches a flow of stories, while paid posts are also shown in users’ home interface. Although this is not something new in the social media universe, on Instagram brands have been fervently integrated in many subtle ways, constituting a ubiquitous phenomenon in the platform. It is a

well-known fact that popular users may get paid to advertise products (see Abidin, 2016a; Abidin, 2017). Sometimes this occurs blatantly as users explicitly declare it; at other times some products “accidentally” show up (see Stewart, 2018). Thus, users are exposed many times to content, which may promote, more or less distinctly, a brand. In addition, Instagram provides tools that facilitate the collaboration between users and brands, rendering it easy for one to become a paid influencer. For instance, a tool located in the story button, labeled as *branded content*, lets users tag a business partner in order to advertise him/her and simultaneously let the partner see the metrics of their stories. Therefore, as users can become *entrepreneurs* or *influencers* and businesses can easily promote themselves, Instagram content is being commercialized. Brands and advertising become part of the Instagram content and users’ flow of information.

Recently, several tools were launched to provide online shopping services, strengthening the commercial character of the platform. For instance, a sticker depicting a shopping bag is available in pictures denoting products for sale. As Instagram (2018d) writes, “From Adidas and Arizia to Louis Vuitton, people have been able to shop from their favorite brands around the world, and now you can shop these businesses in Instagram Stories.” Brands and users can tag the names of their products along with their prices on photographs, while each product is linked to detailed information about it and sometimes to a company’s website, where a purchase can be made. Yet, the most significant Instagram shopping service is the *shop section*, located in the explore interface (*shop* button). By pressing it, users get in front of a personalized endless flow of images of products for sale, such as clothes, watches, flowers, tables, computers, etc. Hence, users have their personal space with infinite items, that they possibly like and prefer, because of the platform’s personalization logic, rendering the purchase of goods especially handy. At this section, there is also a space with all the brands one follows along with other suggested commercial accounts. Each brand name links with a specific section of the company’s profile, in which all the items for sale are collected, along with their prices. In addition, under these brand names there are other profiles of brands suggested for each user. Last but not least, the section also contains a part called *save list*, in which users can add and save items on sale that they want to see again. Potential buyers are also provided with other possibilities. For instance, they can directly visit a brand’s website through this specific section and check out the company’s products and information. According to an Instagram press release, through this place one can shop from their favorite brands as well as keep track of them (Instagram, 2018c). Products are part of Instagram culture, as they get entangled in people’s flow of content while the platform blatantly promotes shopping. Users can come across products in every part of the platform while, simultaneously, they can save them or be informed about them quite easily through the tags of each product for sale. Furthermore, labels mentioning “shopping now” exist under sponsored advertisements, urging users to buying. In addition, in March 2019 (Instagram, 2019a), Instagram enthusiastically launched a new feature for people in the US through which users can buy products without leaving the platform. A

colorful promo video along with an explanatory text introduced the *check out* possibility, mentioning:

You'll only need to enter your name, email, billing information and shipping address the first time you check out. Once your first order is complete, your information will be securely saved for convenience the next time you shop. Once your first order is complete, your information will be securely saved for convenience the next time you shop. You'll also receive notifications about shipment and delivery right inside Instagram, so you can keep track of your purchase (see Instagram, 2019a).

The press release concludes by mentioning some of the big brand names that users can find in this feature. The close affinity of Instagram with brands attests to it being transformed into an online marketplace, steering individuals towards shopping. Nonetheless, Instagram has accumulated many of its shopping services in the *shop section*, a section that is optional to be visited by its users. Thus, users retain, to an extent, control of their use, being able to avoid some major shopping services.

Fuchs (2012, p. 36) characterized Facebook as a “shopping mall without exit.” We would argue that Instagram is even closer to this description, as products have spread to the entire platform. Instagram is advertised as a place where people share everyday moments and communicate with each other, but simultaneously they can fill these moments with shopping tags (see Figure 11). Users do not encounter products only through advertisements but can easily come across them everywhere. Instagram may have found a way to surreptitiously and uncritically incorporate commodities and advertisements into people’s lives by presenting a fascinating spectacle while enabling users to be part of it.



Figure 11 Shopping tags on posts

Interesting is also how the company conceptualizes its shoppers and the act of shopping. According to its press releases (Instagram, 2018d), “shoppers on Instagram are savvy. They visit Instagram looking for the latest trends and styles. With 300M using Instagram Stories every day, people are increasingly finding new products from brands they love.” Thus, Instagram shoppers are conceptualized as people who want to stay up to date, while being savvy and loyal, as the word “love” implies a special and very personal relationship between them and brands. Instagram not only connects people; *things* also play a vital role, as the “about us” section on its website highlights “we bring you closer to the people and things you love” (Instagram, n.d.-a). Brands operate in a way that they become “relational tools and independent domains in which producers and consumers can build connections between each other” (Codeluppi 2017, p. 58). Another Instagram article refers to brands and items as “inspiring” and “motivating” (Instagram, 2018c), revamping shopping as a creative process that requires inspiration. Therefore, it is not only about choosing and buying a shirt: this process requires someone intelligent, knowledgeable and up to date. It requires users who devote their time to staying informed through unceasing scrolling and following their favorite brands. On the platform, users may have illusionary free time. The time supposed to be devoted to non commercial activities may be spent glancing at products and thinking about what to purchase, resembling what Smythe (1977, p. 10) claimed about the transformations effected by capitalism in the nature of work, leisure and consumer behavior. In the Instagram platform, shopping has been transformed into a demanding, distinctive, creative and ubiquitous process requiring users’ “free” time, alertness, energy and devotion.

4.4 Discussion: The contemporary spectacle

The aim of this study was to explore how Instagram constructs user subjectivities, and how it functions as a norm-(re)producing mechanism through its design and discourses surrounding it. Based on the analysis, I argue that Instagram closely resembles a contemporary spectacle – “Spectacle 2.0,” as termed by Briziarelli and Armano (2017) – displaying both familiar and novel characteristics vis-à-vis the Debordian notion. Social media has altered each phase of the spectacle, offering new possibilities to its consumers and producers. Audiences have been replaced by users who can actively participate in its production. This key alteration does not only can change the form of the spectacle itself but also its implications. Briziarelli and Armano describe the new Spectacle mentioning (2017, p. 34):

The Spectacle 2.0, as the name suggests, takes cues from the evolution of new media from the first generation (so called 1.0) of bounded environments in which users were constrained in utilizing the products – thus still mimicking many central features of classic electronic media such as TV – into flexible platforms in which previously considered passive audiences have now apparently the agency to participate in the provision of content and the construction of the web environment.

The spectacle is “a worldview that has actually been materialized” (Debord, 1967/2002, p. 10) and is inextricably linked with commodities, profits and the economy. A new reality arises, an augmented survival, in which primary human needs have been replaced by pseudo-needs expressed by the spectacle (Debord, 1967/2002). According to Debord (1967/2002, p. 30) “the real consumer has become a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this materialized illusion, and the spectacle is its general expression.” Mass media was formerly responsible for bombarding users with the ideal representation of life. With the ongoing *platformization of society* (van Dijck et al., 2018), Instagram becomes the space *par excellence* where the spectacle is produced, consumed and, ultimately, where reality is experienced. These kinds of possibilities express a broader level of practices, norms and habits (see Bucher & Helmond, 2018) where users are steered.

First, despite all the hype about the participatory nature of platforms, a key user subjectivity is that of the *passive recipient of content*, fleshed out by affordances that “train” users to glance at (rather than ponder over) endlessly renewed images tailored to fit users’ habits and expectations through personalizing algorithms. In this sense, the original conception of the passive actor, the *spectator*, the object of the spectacle, still holds to a great extent in the contemporary milieu of the “platform society.” However, at the same time, we can claim that users can be informed about their friends’ everyday activities and be offered the possibility to glance at positive content that sometimes is hard to encounter on other media that focus on news and politics. In addition, users may be steered to instinctively and intensively use the

platform, but this type of use can sometimes have a positive influence on their self-esteem and well-being (Trifiro & Prena, 2021).

The second user subjectivity inscribed by the platform is the *producer of spectacular content*. Guy Debord started the *Society of the Spectacle* (1967/2002, p. 9) by arguing that “everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.” Instagram provides users with numerous tools to represent their life online in its best possible version. The fact that users assume a more active role as content producers means that Spectacle 2.0 is not only more “discursive and interactive” (Briziarelli & Armano 2017, p. 34) but also an “amalgamation of compound practices such as consumptive production and productive consumption” (Briziarelli & Armano 2017, p. 35). Also, because what people encounter is, to an extent, shaped by other users like them (through personalization), the new spectacle becomes more familiar and more comfortable. In addition, Instagram’s strategic valorization of mundane everyday life means that Spectacle 2.0 colonizes or subsumes most spheres of social life (Briziarelli & Armano 2017). By normalizing the transformation of everyday banality into content worth sharing, Instagram enables users’ “self-spectacularization” (Baroncelli & Freitas, 2011; Briziarelli & Armano, 2017), which means that users are no longer just the “mediated objects” of the spectacle but also its “mediating subjects” (Baroncelli & Freitas, 2011; Briziarelli & Armano, 2017). This is closely related to the norms governing *spectacular content*, namely the type of content that is sought by the platform and is being produced by possibly well-trained users. In this respect, the key logic of spectacle 2.0 is the “aestheticization of everyday life” (Compton, 2004). Codeluppi (2017, p. 55) refers to a more pervasive model of “aesthetic capitalism,” whose fuel is the digital image that is fluid and liquid enough to serve the creation of economic value. In the case of Instagram, *aestheticization* is associated with three interrelated processes.

First, we witness the *standardization of content* in digestible terms and with a positivist aura, along with an emphasis on aesthetics⁸ instead of meaning. The analogies with Horkheimer and Adorno’s theorization (1944/1997) of the culture industry are striking. According to them, the standardization of culture not only means that cultural industry produces similar commodities but also generates a commodified audience who follows the needs that the capitalist system creates. In the case of Instagram, this culture triggers desires and urges users to maintain the capitalist system by participating in it through the reproduction of specific content. Likes, hearts, happy emojis, funny effects, users’ best moments, filters and brands construct an enormous positive and promising reality towards which users are steered. This positive ambience composes the spectacle where “what appears is good, what is good appears” (Debord, 1967/2002, p. 12), allowing it to achieve its ultimate aim, namely to reproduce itself. “A

⁸ Codeluppi (2017, p. 59), tracing the evolution of the processes of mediatization and aestheticization from the 1970s in capitalist societies, argues that aesthetics itself had to be changed into an “aesthetic without depth” (Darley, 2000) with emphasis on “style, appearance, form, ornament and sensation rather than meaning and interpretation.”

spectacle aims at nothing other than itself,” as “its means and ends are identical” (Debord, 1967/2002, p. 12). Instagram’s most common affordances, such as filters and effects, contribute to the alienation of the uploaded images from what is actually experienced. The discourse produced by the platform itself and marketing agencies urges users to “upgrade” reality, implying that it is not good enough. In the realm of the spectacle, the satisfaction of primary human needs has been replaced by “an incessant fabrication of pseudoneeds” (Debord, 1967/2002, p. 31). People are urged to *separate* themselves from their own lives and selves, identifying their needs through the spectacle. A desire to represent a better reality is triggered with a view to creating an ideal impression to others, as the spectacle is a social relation between people mediated by images (Debord, 1967/2002, p. 10). Instagram presents itself as an ideal place where relationships bloom, communities thrive and users’ mundane everyday life and concerns are made to be appealing and worth sharing.

Second, aestheticization serves the process of *commodification of everyday life*, resonating the Marxian (1984/1995) critique of commodification, as “the diffusion of aesthetics in everyday life has facilitated the entry of every object, as well as every individual, institution and event, into the circuit of the market and of the consumer world” (Codeluppi, 2017, p. 60). Thus, the countless ideas, inspirations, and experiences of users are shaped into specific aesthetic forms and are put to use to create economic value. Being *instagrammable* is key to enter Instagram economy; at the same time, it is a powerful means for bringing commodities into users’ lives. For instance, a host of businesses are adapting their products or services to best fulfill this norm. Instagram museums are designed in a way so that they become the most instagrammable places. Millions of people have already visited them buying tickets costing around 35\$ (see Barringer, 2018) so as to post an outstanding picture. While some years ago museums and galleries used to forbid the use of cameras during an exhibition, today the message is: “I was there. I came, I saw, and I selfied,” according to Jia Jia Fei (2016), Digital Strategist for Museums and the Art World. Even the very theme of each museum, such as the Ice cream Museum, Pizza Museum, Happy Place and Candytopia, reflects the promoted topics and aesthetics of Instagram, namely food, candies and, in general, eye-catching content. In addition, these museums have already collaborated with brands that are promoted through them, such as Sephora and Tinder (Leaver et al., 2020). Restaurants tend to offer dishes attuned to the Instagram aesthetic, such as the “unicorn foods,” while they design their space to be instagrammable (see Leaver et al., 2020). Therefore, lucrative businesses are dedicated to making profit by providing people the means to catch others’ attention on Instagram, whereas people immerse themselves in their smartphones trying to capture as many photographs as they can. In 2018, the Vienna Tourist Board started an anti-Instagram campaign named “Unhashtag Vienna”, promoting their motto “experience more, photograph less!” (Buckley, 2018). They tried to make people and visitors to enjoy the city behind their photographs and experience it more. As Debord claimed, “the spectacle is money one can only look at, because in it all use

has already been exchanged for the totality of abstract representation” (Debord, 1967/2002, p. 30).

The third aspect of aestheticization is related to the *depoliticisation* of both content and users. Codeluppi (2017) argues about how the failure of the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s to bring about social change and personal realization made disillusioned individuals replace the ambitions of societal transformation with the transformation of every individual’s personal image. Instagram, by valorizing mundane everyday experiences through an aesthetics serving primarily commodification, enhances the spectacularization of daily life, e.g. 43.9k photographs share the hashtag #bananashake. Thus, Instagram inscribes the potential to appease and control while diversifications and objections are fading, echoing classic critiques of the traditional cultural industries with regard to repetition and standardization leading to conservatism and lack of experimentation (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1997). A vast positivity constructed by appealing products, beautiful images, and tones of filters may prevail over contradictions and opposition. What the spectacle demands is a passive acceptance, being “effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply” (Debord, 1967/2002, p. 12).

At the center of spectacle 2.0 lies users’ ability to produce content; thus, in its very core resides the possibility for rupture and subversion, as spectacle 2.0 is produced by its users who can reappropriate the “preferred use” of the platform – cf. Stuart Hall’s (1973) “preferred reading” and Shaw’s (2017) analysis – transforming and weakening the spectacle. So questions are raised on how users handle this source of both power and oppression. Users can shape the spectacle by “freely” participating in it, since they have the option to choose how they participate and what they produce. Nonetheless, this sense of freedom may be a precondition of the existence of power, letting the spectacle penetrate people’s lives (see Foucault, 1982). Furthermore, in the platform society, users’ participation is not always sufficient to claim that a user is genuinely active, while a passive user who does not adopt and follow the platform’s norms may be more “active” than a producer. Thus, the boundaries regarding what active means and who and how is active are blurred. Taking a closer look at users’ practices may disclose whether (or not) individuals resist and subvert the system even without rejecting it (see de Certeau, 1984).

The third user subjectivity that emerged from this analysis is the *sociable user*, where human interaction and social relationships are hollowed out, “metrified” and then commodified. Instagram aims at establishing norms and prescribing specific needs, one of which is the *exposure* to others. As Baudrillard (1993, p. 23) claimed:

So it is not: I exist, I am here! but rather: I am visible, I am an image – look! Look! This is not even narcissism, merely an extraversion without depth, a sort of self-promoting ingenuousness whereby everyone becomes the manager of their own appearance.

Users are urged to become part of the spectacular Instagram culture, by following specific aesthetic prototypes and patterns to receive likes and comments. In this process, everyday life is being instrumentalized, as people are motivated to constantly upload their personal moments so as to declare their worthiness and receive positive feedback. This is akin to the increasingly extensive and normalized practice of self-branding, which is “not just a technique of self-presentation via social media, but it is a more complex strategy based on the transformation of emotions as a competitive resource in the global market of identities” (Barile, 2017, p. 153). Spectacle 2.0, in the context of Instagram, is extended to social and intimate relationships, which are depersonalized and reified (Barile, 2017). The spectacle produces a subjectivity which “may live this spectacle both as alienation and a form of dis-alienation”: in the former case by functioning as a performer of a constructed reality (rather than a potent agent), and in the latter “through the promise of hyper-connectivity, sociability and transparency” (Briziarelli & Armano, 2017, p. 40). On the other hand, Instagram adds more and more interactive communication tools to the platform that users can utilize to connect. Thus, we must recognize that Instagram also enables users to communicate and possibly make people feel closer to each other as other social media platforms do (see Bucher, 2021).

The last type of subjectivity impelled by Instagram is the *consumer of commodities and aspiring influencers (prospective entrepreneurs)*. According to Smythe (1977), the media industry produces audiences eligible for sale to advertisers, generating an “audience commodity,” whose members’ work is to “learn to buy particular ‘brands’ of consumer goods, and to spend their income accordingly” (p. 6). I argue that the platform is offered as a “free lunch” to people, which according to Smythe (1977, p. 5):

consists of materials which whet the prospective audience members’ appetites and thus (1) attract and keep them attending to the programme, newspaper or magazine, and (2) cultivate a mood conducive to favourable reaction to the explicit and implicit advertisers’ messages.

Accordingly, through personalization algorithms, Instagram attracts users’ attention by providing them with content they are interested in. At the same time, users are exposed to a number of aesthetically pleasing images with brands that can possibly trigger their desire to purchase the products they spectate. Thus, Instagram as a “free lunch” attract and hold users who will pay attention to advertisements and shopping opportunities. Instagram is seemingly devoted to entertainment, but it simultaneously provides businesses with audiences ready to embrace their brands. On Instagram, shopping is being transformed into a demanding,

distinctive, creative and ubiquitous process requiring users' time, alertness, energy and devotion – signifying the pleasure gained but also a sense of duty to consume (Bauman, 2000), a duty that is translated into the production of audiences with consuming behavior. These audiences are “sold” to companies while the platform gains profits. Abidin (2016a) claimed that influencers repurpose Instagram suggested use when they produce commercial selfies; yet, the commercial aspect they preserve and promote, may be the original and true intended use of Instagram. However, we cannot neglect that the platform also offers a professional opportunity and working tool to users who can make profits by promoting their services and becoming influencers, a privilege previously belonging mainly to celebrities.

Through the interface design and specifically the platform's affordances and the conceptualization of them in specific ways through discourses, human behavior in the platform can be directed in order to be conducive to Instagram. Affordances enable certain things and constrain others, demarcating users' behavior (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Thus, Instagram can be seen as a *technology of government* (Foucault, 1982; Rose, 1999) imbued with aspirations for shaping users' conduct and making them stay on the platform and adopt the *inscribed subjectivities*, consuming and producing specific content, socializing with other users in particular ways and interacting with brands purchasing stuff.

As Crary remarks (1999, cited in Briziarelli & Armano 2017, p. 43), “like a Greek tragedy, the spectacle functions as an interface between the spectator and social reality.” Yet interfaces function much like texts (Hutchby, 2001) in that, while they are configured in certain ways, they allow for cracks and slits through which users maintain an agency in their interpretations and use practices. While this study has focused on how the Instagram platform configures users and uses, it has not looked at how users make sense of these configurations, which leaves the possibility of “anti-spectacular” uses and subjectivities wide open. For instance, one can postulate that the validation of mundane everyday life by the platform, despite its profound commodification, may signify a sense of empowerment for ordinary users. In fact, some studies (e.g. Costa, 2018) have shown that users in certain contexts are able to negotiate prescribed affordances of social media and retain control over the organization of their social relations. In addition, in the last few years, several studies have revealed that Instagram is used for political purposes and influence (Ekman & Widholm, 2017) while topics related to feminism and social advocacy are promoted through the platform as well (Savolainen et al., 2022; Crowder, 2021). Users build communities (Berard & Smith, 2019), socialize and maintain friendships (Ting et al., 2015), while Instagram is also used by social movements, which utilize it to their advantage (Cornet et al., 2017). Furthermore, studies focusing on Instagram influencers indicate the complexity of Instagram use, as they harness the platform's power appropriating its tools to achieve their personal goals (see Abidin, 2016a, 2016b, 2017). On the other hand, what emerges as particularly problematic in the “platformized” spectacle is that it appears to appropriate (and potentially neutralize) users' power of self-representation. Viewing the

spectacle, following Debord, in dialectical terms, namely its potential both to perfect domination *and* produce critical subjectivities and “moments of rupture” (Briziarelli & Armano, 2017, p. 23) opens up many interesting possibilities for further research, especially on user practices of “ordinary” Instagrammers. Although Instagram urges individuals to use the platform in specific ways, the history of social media platforms, such as Facebook, indicates that users can form and influence these platforms to an extent. As Stanfill (2015, p. 1071) argues, future work is needed “combining discursive interface analysis with ethnographic examinations of site visitors themselves or industry workers and their production processes in order to enrich the understanding of how interfaces reflect cultural common sense and produce norms.”

This study focused on Instagram interfaces and the surrounding discourses with the aim of exploring platform’s power. However, in order to investigate power relations, it is also crucial to focus on algorithms. Algorithmic systems are seen as intermediaries of information (see Gillespie, 2017) but also governance mechanisms that can be used to exert power and further political and economic interests on individuals (Just & Latzer, 2017). In particular, personalization algorithms prioritize information, granting visibility and certifying meanings, as they “discern and amplify some information over others” (Gillespie, 2017, p. 75), also shaping individuals’ realities (Just & Latzer, 2017). Thus, there is “a pressing need for critical attention across the social sciences and humanities to be focused on algorithms and forms of algorithmic governance” (Kitchin, 2017, p. 13). This study has shown that the Instagram design and discourses urge users toward an ideal use of the platform related to aestheticization and the spectacle. Thus, it is also significant to explore if algorithms also steer users towards the inscribed subjectivities, nudge specific behavior, and structure preferences (see Kitchin, 2017) in ways conducive to the spectacle and the platform’s economy.

5. #Study 2 Instagram Algorithms: De-coding Instagram as a Spectacle

5.1 Introducing the study

“To improve your experience, your feed will soon be ordered to show the moments we believe you will care about the most,” Instagram announced in March 2016, while introducing a new personalization algorithm. Since then, the platform has become more algorithmic and increasingly computational (Carah & Shaul, 2016). As it has already been mentioned, personalization algorithms have raised discussions regarding their implications (Cheney-Lippond, 2011), such as the emergence of filter bubbles with severe repercussions for users (Cheney-Lippond, 2011; Just & Latzer, 2017; Pariser, 2011).

Many studies have tried to investigate the consequences of personalization algorithms and the existence of filter bubbles on several platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and Google (Feuz, Fuller & Stalder, 2011; Bakshy et al., 2015; Salehi, Du & Ashman, 2015; Kulshrestha et al., 2017; Barker, 2018) – with mixed results thus far. In the context of Instagram, there are few studies on personalization to date. Skrubbeltrang et al. (2017) focus on the exploration of users’ beliefs about personalized algorithms, whereas Stoica, Riederer and Chaintreau (2018) explore social recommendations and their effects on gender and homophily. Other studies look into algorithmic awareness (Fouquaert & Mechant, 2021) or how influencers interact with Instagram algorithms, and may control them to their benefit (see Cotter, 2019; O’ Meara, 2019). Individuals devote a remarkable proportion of time and energy to Instagram, as for instance, they “like” 4.2 billion photographs on average per day (Aslam, 2019) while being exposed to a vast number of images. However, is this content what they really care about the most?

Instagram is a platform that has been integrated into people’s life, constituting an everyday activity. At the same time, Instagram is a commercial platform with over 200 million Instagram business accounts (Wise, 2022). Therefore, although its founder wanted Instagram to be a way for people to be up to date about the world seeing their morning news on the platform from several sources and channels (see Kiss, 2013), the platform is overwhelmed with brands raising concerns about the content it promotes. In particular, the personalization logic of Instagram and its commercial nature raise concerns regarding the emergence of filter bubbles and “individual realities” (Just & Latzer, 2017, p. 248), privileging topics that reflect a firm market logic and represent a reality where capitalism dominates. The second study of this Ph.D. research aims at investigating in depth the existence of a filter bubble on Instagram, posing the following questions: Do filter bubbles exist on Instagram? Do Instagram algorithms favor commercial soft topics?

5.2 Instagram algorithms, commerciality, popularity and filter bubbles

A decade ago, Eli Pariser (2011) popularized the term “filter bubble” referring to the decrease of information diversity that people receive online. According to this approach, personalization renders possible that users encounter content based on their previous online actions and history, being enclosed in predetermined endless loops of information. On the one hand, several studies have already indicated its presence in social media and web search (Feuz et al., 2011; Bakshy et al., 2015; Salehi et al., 2015; Kulshrestha et al., 2017; Barker, 2018) as well as its harmful repercussions, like stereotyping behavior, political polarization (Wolf, 2016; Cheney-Lippold, 2011; Pariser, 2011), adverse effects on knowledge gain (Beam, 2014) and “different individual realities” (Just & Latzer, 2017, p. 248). Barker (2018), focusing on actions of creative process, argued that Google’s personalization practices limit exposure to qualitative stimuli that are necessary in order to trigger creativity and new ideas. On the other hand, some researchers challenge the existence of filter bubbles and their impacts, as people may maintain a “diverse information diet” across online spaces or entirely avoid platforms that tend to provide them with one-sided information (Burns, 2019; Dutton et al., 2017).

In the case of Instagram, although there are some studies focusing on personalization and Instagram algorithms to date (see Skrubbeltrang et al., 2017; Cotter, 2019; O’Meara, 2019; Quick, 2021), the filter bubble assumption is currently underexplored. Studying Instagram algorithms, social recommendations and their effects on gender and homophily, Stoica et al. (2018) reveal that algorithms can worsen pre-existing inequality and homophily. Instagram is a commercial platform and a strong corporate tool for businesses that disseminate their content via their accounts. Brands and businesses use algorithms to engage users with their brands and increase their visibility (see Abidin, 2016b). In addition, influencers seem to familiarize themselves with how algorithms work and accordingly “play” with the algorithms and formulate tactics to engage users with the content and gain visibility (Cotter, 2019). The way businesses and influencers leverage Instagram algorithms can affect the standardization of specific content, like how the human body is represented (Carah & Shaul, 2016). As the platform consists of a remarkable number of businesses, the recommended content may be affected by the brands’ visibility strategies, also considering that Instagram has never distinguished advertisements and brands from the content shared by ordinary users (Carah & Shaul, 2016). The role of advertisers, influencers and brands that advantageously promote their content along with the platform’s commercial nature raises concerns about whether personalization favors a marketplace predominantly for advertising purposes and creates a commercial and mainstream filter bubble.

Although Instagram’s algorithms are sealed entities, affinity and popularity are two essential criteria used to algorithmically suggest content to users (see Mosseri, 2021). In the page

“Search and Explore” Instagram’s algorithms recommend content tailored to each user (affinity); these posts “are selected automatically based on things like the people you follow or the posts you like” (Instagram, n.d.-a). More specifically, Instagram claimed that some of the most significant factors for a post to be recommended are the user’s history of interacting with the person who posted, information about them and the user’s activity (Mosseri, 2021). It is also worth mentioning that the precursor of the “Search and Explore” page was the “Popular Page” which was released in 2012 and displayed the most “liked” stuff of Instagram (Pierce, 2017). At the time of writing, popularity is still an essential component for a post to go viral on Instagram as well: “The more comments and likes you get, the likelier you are to find your place on the Instagram Explore page” (Carter, 2019, para. 24). Many websites, blogs and tutorial videos suggest tips to users so as to become more popular, gather likes, comments and followers and make it to the Explore page. Two standard pieces of advice are, first, to exploit the popular hashtags and brand names and, second, to follow Instagram trends that they find on the Explore page (see Moreau, 2019; see Forsey, 2019). These suggested practices provide vital clues about the existence of a popularity loop. In addition, some of the top Instagram hashtags and the most famous Instagram categories (Saraco, 2022), such as #love, #fashion, #lifestyle, #beautiful, #makeup, #foodporn⁹, show that popular topics relate to soft and entertaining topics or content related to physical appearance and happy life. Thus, what the algorithm chooses to display along with promotion practices of brands and influencers may play an essential role in forming popularity and establishing specific kinds of “privileged” topics.

Although Instagram can be seen as a platform that exists merely for commercial and entertainment purposes, as Abidin (2016a) contend, in the last few years it has been embraced so widely by users that it has become a tool for engaging with other causes too, such as social movements, political content, and topics pertaining to social advocacy and human rights, like body positivity, activism, feminism, etc. (Mahoney et al., 2016; Crowder, 2021; Savolainen et al., 2022). Several politicians utilize Instagram for political influence, while social movements leverage it towards a collective goal (Cornet et al., 2017; Ekman & Widholm, 2017). However, even that content can sometimes be exploited so as to be conducive to capitalist interests (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). A recent study (Afnan et al., 2019), for example, has indicated that commercial accounts exploit the popularity of social movements’ hashtags, such as the #MeToo hashtag, to increase their products’ visibility promoting commodified posts. The findings revealed that one in five posts sampled with a hashtag related to the MeToo movement had a commercial aspect (Afnan et al., 2019).

Therefore, taking everything into account, two crucial questions emerge: Do Instagram’s algorithms foster diversity? Do all kinds of issues have equal opportunities to be recommended

⁹ Similar topics were popular in previous years (2019, 2020, 2021).

to users and acquire visibility? Instagram is a commercial platform, but at the same time, a place of visual public culture (see Manovich, 2016), and when algorithms become arbiters of culture, we have to ask how this culture is shaped and whether diversity is promoted. These concerns echo Instagram users' worries, as documented by Skrubbyltrang et al. (2017), who investigated more than 8000 users' comments regarding the implementation of algorithmic personalization on Instagram in 2016. According to Skrubbyltrang et al. (2017) users are most concerned about the prevalence of commercial interests and the domination of mainstream content on their feeds. Therefore, users are concerned about the domination of advertisements and brands, as well as the disregard of independent subcultures by the platform. Hallinan and Striphas (2016, p. 122) explicate the risks for content diversity with "algorithmic culture":

The production of sophisticated recommendations produces greater customer satisfaction which produces more customer data which in turn produce more sophisticated recommendations, and so on, resulting—theoretically—in a closed commercial loop in which culture conforms to, more than it confronts, its users.

These concerns point to the question of whether Instagram users are exposed mostly to recommendations of mainstream and commercial content, thus being enclosed in a filter bubble of soft topics. Given that Instagram is part of people's everyday life and has simultaneously been quite uncritically incorporated into it (Carah & Shaul, 2016), it is vital to investigate the stimuli and content to which users are exposed and whether diversity is promoted.

5.3 Methodology and Data

Taking everything into account, the second study of this doctoral dissertation aims to answer the following questions: Does the Instagram algorithm favor specific topics? Do filter bubbles exist on the platform? Focusing on the Instagram algorithms, three empirical audits of Instagram were held. These audits focus on exploring algorithms as a recommendation system and the existence of filter bubbles and their nature, emphasizing on the Explore page of Instagram. This part of the platform has been selected, as it has been characterized as "one giant recommendation engine" (Titlow, 2017) which is based on and functions through algorithmic suggestions. By the term *audit studies* or otherwise *algorithmic auditing*, I refer to the research design that reveals the potential unwanted consequences of algorithmic systems (Sandvig et al., 2014). In addition, algorithm audits aim to bring fairness, accountability, transparency and explainability on automated systems. The current research design of Study #2 belongs to the type of *sock puppet audit studies* in which researchers impersonate users with specific characteristics, preferences and interests, usually by creating fake user accounts

(Sandvig et al., 2014). Audit studies, relying on the reverse engineering method¹⁰, have been accused of providing just “fuzzy glimpses” on how algorithms operate (Diakopoulos, as cited in Kitchin, 2014, p. 20). However, the proposed study attempts to investigate different parts of the Instagram assemblage, making reverse engineering only one part of the analysis so that we can have an overall and more complete understanding of Instagram’s operation. Furthermore, reverse engineering can educe various effects of algorithms, even unintended side effects, which cannot be traced even if one speaks to the programmers (Diakopoulos, 2013). In addition, the specific technique of sock puppet audit studies provides “a great deal of control over the manipulation and data collection” (Sandvig et al., 2014, p. 20). Researchers face the lack of alternative methods, given that there are several obstacles with regard to the investigation of autonomous algorithmic systems (see McKelvey, 2014; Kitchin, 2014), and this study proposes algorithmic audits as a method that can be employed in critical approaches to the study of platformization (see Poell, Nieborg & Van Dijck, 2019).

In addition, audit studies have raised concerns about the ethical decisions that researchers should take. In particular, in the case of the constructed accounts, the method has been accused of wasting platforms’ resources, such as storage and processing, while real users may also waste their time interacting with the fake accounts (Elovici et al., 2014). Although these ethical concerns were raised during the audit studies, I tried to reduce them. First of all, I deleted the constructed accounts when the research process was completed. In addition, I did not upload content through them. Secondly, I interacted with other users only when necessary to fortify each user’s history by liking content and following profiles. When some Instagram users tried to communicate with the fake accounts by sending messages, I did not answer. Therefore, although I was confronted with the ethical dilemmas of sock puppet audit studies, I mitigated the use of these accounts. Thus, I can claim that their limited use has not affected the Instagram platform and its users.

The diagram below (Figure 12) shows the procedure and the research questions of each audit study.

¹⁰ Reverse engineering is “the process of articulating the specifications of a system through a rigorous examination drawing on domain knowledge, observation, and deduction to unearth a model of how that system works” (Diakopoulos, 2013, p. 13).

IN SEARCH OF A POTENTIAL FILTER BUBBLE

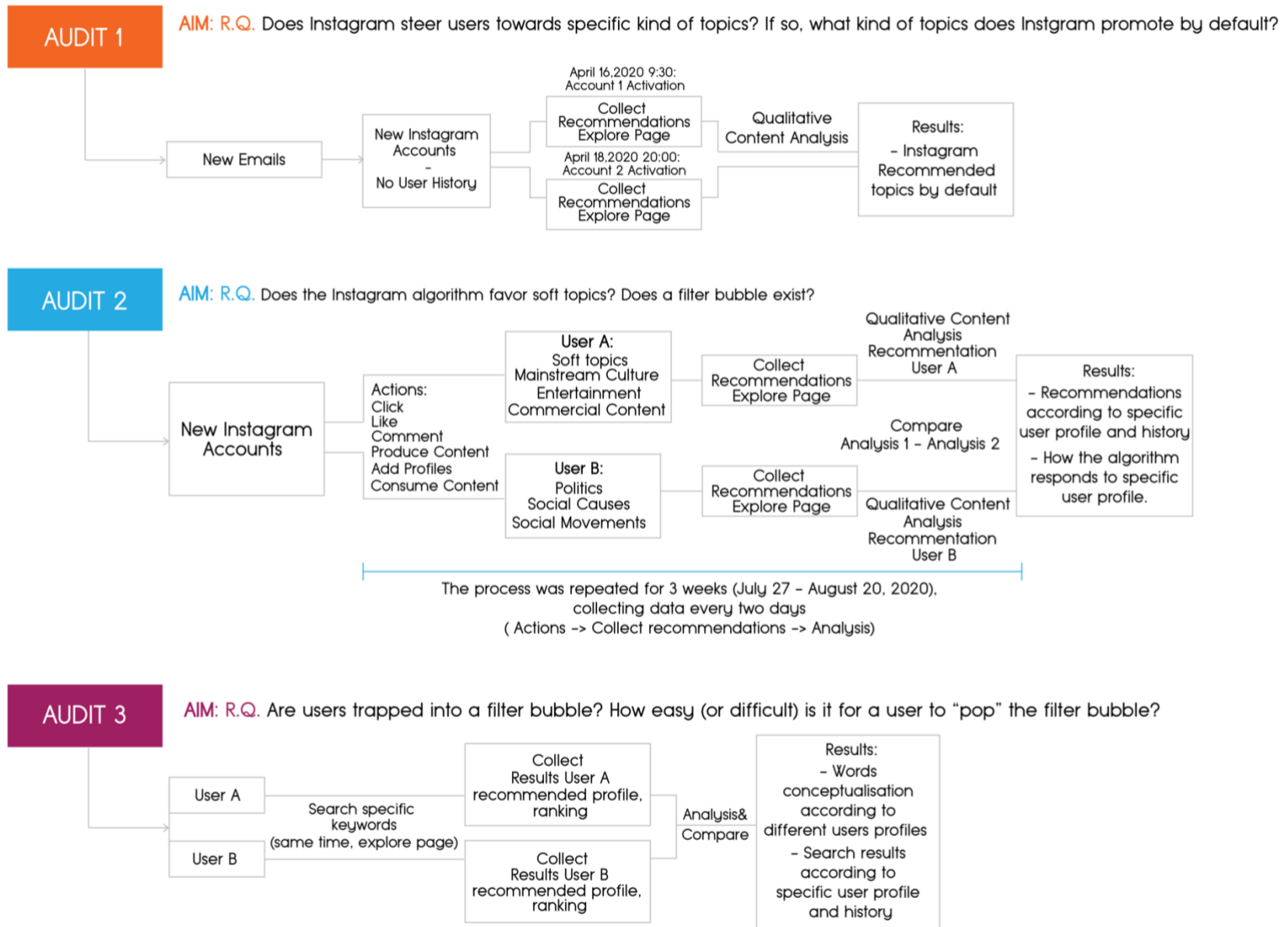


Figure 12 Three empirical algorithmic audit studies of Instagram regarding the investigation of the existence of a filter bubble

5.4. Audit #1

5.4.1 Audit #1 methodology

The first audit poses the following questions: *Does Instagram steer users towards specific kind of topics? If so, what kind of topics does Instagram promote by default?* (see Figure 12).

The recommendations made to users without previous use history were collected to answer these research questions. To achieve that, first and foremost, a pilot data collection was conducted with my mobile phone and a trial account so that I familiarize myself with the procedure. Then, two new mobile devices were utilized, and two new email accounts were created and used to make two new Instagram profiles. Since the Instagram content is renewed almost every minute, the profiles were activated in different moments in time to explore whether there are different kinds of results over time. The first one was activated at 9.30 on April 16, 2020 (Audit 1.1) and the second profile at 20.00 on April 18, 2020 (Audit 1.2). Given that different locations may result in different recommendations, it should be mentioned that both profiles were activated in Nicosia, Cyprus.

In both cases, the data was collected by taking screenshots of each post on the Explore page, together with its tags, text, profile name, etc., also marking the order in which they appeared on the Explore page. The first 80 posts were captured and saved. In addition, at the time of data collection, Instagram also recommended images organized by categories, like food and clothes. The first ten photographs of the first two recommended categories, namely décor and travel, were also gathered. At this point, it should be mentioned that I tried to collect the recommendations automatically from the Instagram Explore page, using computational methods and asking for advice from experts of Cyprus University of Technology and Utrecht University where I was located during the design of the second study's research plan. Although several tools¹¹ can be used to automatically collect data, such as hashtags, pictures from one's account and comments, the automated collection of the Explore page's data was not feasible on the mobile or the desktop Instagram version, mainly because of the access restrictions on the Instagram's API. This indicates limitations but also possibilities for future studies. Nonetheless, as Laestadius (2017, p. 580) claimed, "the analysis of small samples of Instagram data can provide extremely valuable insights that could not be obtained from Big Data," as they can be analyzed qualitatively offering a granularity of detail.

Next, the posts of Audit 1.1 and Audit 1.2 were analyzed qualitatively, applying an open coding process, which was followed in all audit studies of this research. This method is traditionally applied to text, but it can also be used for images and videos (Pennington, 2017). According to

¹¹ These tools are not approved by Instagram

Pennington (2017), the codes can represent categories that exist at the surface level or reflect more profound levels of meaning. First, I coded for the topics of each post, writing down in which topic category each picture belongs. For instance, when a picture represented buildings and monuments and also was accompanied by hashtags such as #architecture and #architecturelove, it was coded as a picture that belonged to the architecture topic category. In addition, other categories also emerged, such as shopping and nature. I also focused on and analyzed the caption of each image together with the hashtags in order to understand how each image is presented and conceptualized. This analysis aimed at showing which topics Instagram recommends by default. In addition, the number of likes, text, hashtags, timestamps and the commerciality of each post were recorded and analyzed by the same process. Furthermore, the profile of the user who posted each image was visited, collecting information concerning its type (namely a business profile, a photographer's profile, etc.)¹², and the number of its followers. The profiles were visited through a third mobile device and account so as not to influence the use history of the new accounts. These elements were included in the analysis in order to understand if they play a role in the (algorithmic) decision about which posts and content appear on the Explore page and to what extent they affect the Instagram algorithm. For example, Figure 13 presents an indicative image that was collected during Audit 1.1 and analyzed together with its text. In addition, the profile who uploaded it was also checked. This image was coded as a photograph related to #animals and #everydaylife, while it was also described with the codes #hope and #positive_message based on its text as well as with the code #explicitly_commercial. For an indicative illustration of the recommendations and their analysis see Appendix 5. All collected recommendations and their analysis are gathered in an online file that can be found in the following link: <https://bit.ly/3zAAzwS>.

¹² This information is explicitly or implicitly mentioned. In particular, information is explicitly mentioned when a user adds this detail into his or her profile. It is possible to implicitly infer the type of a user's profile by the user's personal details and statements (e.g. "I am a professional photograph, DM for collaborations") or links that the account provides.

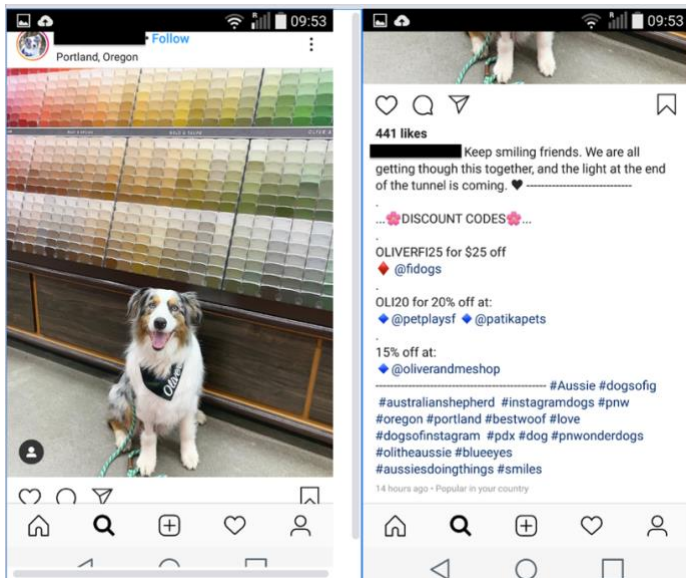


Figure 13 Post collected during the Audit 1.1

5.4.2 Audit #1 results

Photographs related to nature and architecture seem to dominate the recommended content of both Explore pages, such as waterfalls, the sea, sunsets, monuments and buildings depicting their interior or exterior design. In particular, 65 out of 88 images (73%) belonged to these topics¹³. Both categories represent the space surrounding people, either natural or constructed, something that is undeniably part of everyday life. The vast majority of the images come from business profiles, namely 58 out of 88 images (65%), and in particular, architects, architecture studios or professional photographers who aim to promote their services. On the one hand, the content is highest-quality and professional and can inspire, but on the other hand, it depicts a distant reality for many people. Luxury buildings with concrete, glass and stylish aesthetics accompanied by hashtags related to minimalism, which is perceived as a lifestyle accepted by the wealthy population (Nikolic & Vasilski, 2018), are displayed. In addition, the first category Instagram recommends is décor. The first photographs of this category depict atmospheric rooms decorated with brands, like Channel, Prada or Apple products, featuring consumerism as a part of an ideal image and lifestyle. Regarding the images related to nature, fascinating, unique landscapes prevail, captured and edited with professional techniques resulting in idyllic places emanating positivity. The texts that accompany them imply that those landscapes are part of the photographers' everyday life or that they are places they can easily visit, "can't wait to get back in the Tuscany" (see Figure 14), "I'd probably go back to the waterfalls in the rain..." The content shares a specific aesthetic, catching users' eye with its atmosphere or style, highlighting the importance of aesthetics and appearance. Some human figures also show up in these environments, being part of this scenery.

¹³ Nature and Landscape photographs: 20 photographs (Audit 1.1), 19 photographs (Audit 1.2), Architecture: 12 photographs (Audit 1.1), 14 photographs (Audit 1.2).

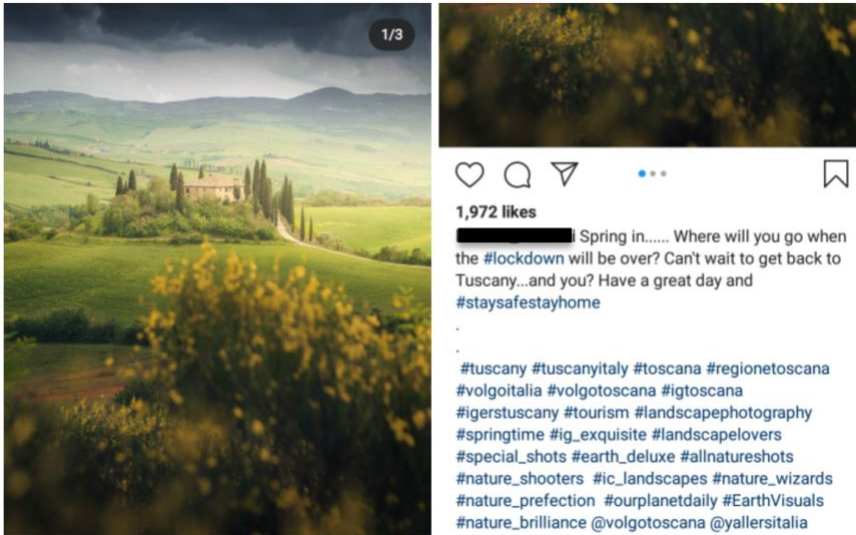


Figure 14 Image from a photographer's account

The majority of the pictures (72 out of 88, 81%) that appeared in both accounts belong to commercial profiles. Several hashtags accompany almost every image, a tactic usually employed to gain more visibility. In addition, phrases like “Check out more at ...” or “Do you like it?” are used to engage ones audience with the content. Most accounts that emerged during the data collection were popular accounts with many followers or likes. More specifically, only one image of the 88 images had less than 100 likes, and 52 images had more than 1.000 likes (59%). Based on this finding, popularity seems to be a critical factor that drives an image to the Explore page as well as marketing strategies, such as the use of hashtags, that commercial accounts employ.

This analysis shows that a new Instagram user without prior use history is mainly recommended commercial content related to soft topics and an ideal everyday life, coming from business accounts. We can argue that popularity plays an essential role for an image to appear on the Explore page, especially when Instagram cannot associate the posts with users' previous activity and use history (the so-called “cold start” problem for engineers of recommender systems). Although there are accounts that pertain to news or social causes and movements, with thousands of followers and likes (see Yang, 2020), such accounts did not appear in the data gathered, raising concerns about how the platform promotes the content. On the outset of Instagram, Kevin Systrom claimed that he created an app because of his love for photography (see Hartmans, 2020). Presently, however, the retro photographic character of Instagram has been blended with its commercial purposes.

5.5 Audit #2

5.5.1 Audit #2 methodology

In the second audit study, I focus specifically on the filter bubble assumption, taking into account the platform’s practice of algorithmic filtering. Instagram is a platform that consists of commercial and mainstream content but at the same time also of noncommercial accounts supporting social causes and users who express themselves. The following questions are posed in the second audit: *Do filter bubbles exist on Instagram?* Instagram is a commercial platform full of businesses and influencers following strategies and tips to endorse their posts; thus, this audit also poses the question: *Does the Instagram algorithm favor soft topics?* (see also Figure 12).

To answer the second research question a user profile (User A) was constructed, with a preference for soft topics, namely mainstream and commercial content, indicated by clicks, likes, comments, posts and connections to profiles as well as following the most popular topics on Instagram (see Puttkamer, 2019). More specifically, profiles related to beauty, influencers, celebrities, cute animals, food, brands and fitness were selected (see Figure 17). For instance, “gymshark” and “lilymaymac” (see Figure 15) accounts were followed. This procedure was repeated for two days. To fortify the history and online identity of User A, approximately four to five profiles were followed each day of the data collection period. These profiles were selected from the Instagram recommended content. User A also searched for some profile names in order to enrich its history with other soft topics, e.g., luxury lifestyle, brands, beauty and travel. In addition, the user liked the recommended photos that were aligned with their preferences, while also watching all ‘stories’ of the followed accounts and reacting to them to increase engagement. Hence, this profile mimics and represents a user aligned with soft topics.

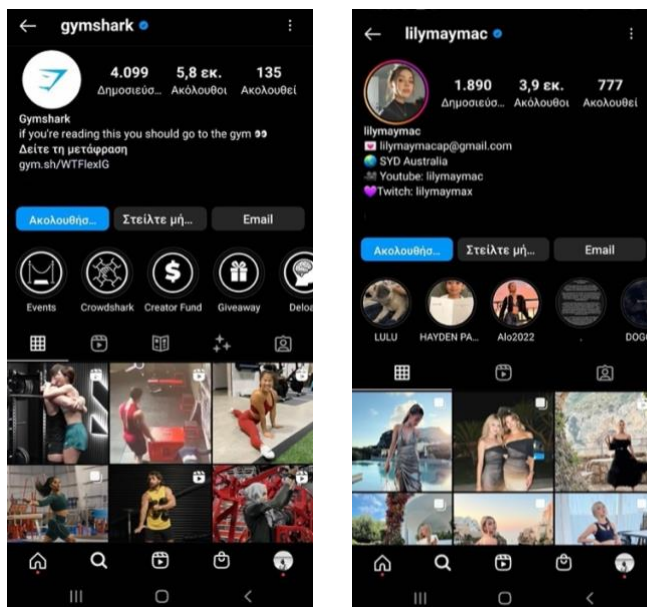


Figure 15 “Gymshark” and “Lilymaymac” accounts

This process was repeated simultaneously with a second profile (User B), which manifested a preference for non-commercial and non-mainstream accounts. In particular, profiles related to climate change, animal abuse, black activists, feminist topics, art, activists, politics and alternative media were selected (see Figure 16). Each profile was cautiously chosen to represent a more alternative perspective. The profiles found were visited and reviewed through a third account and mobile device so as not to affect the profile's history. Those that met the criteria of an alternative profile, namely having as their aim political and social action (Atton, 1999) and also being non-commercial, were followed by User B. In particular, none of the aforementioned profiles had any commercial interests and many of them were not popular in terms of followers and likes. For example, "the yes men" and "legally black uk" were followed (see Figure 16). Otherwise, the same process as in case of User A, i.e., liking photos and following and interacting with specific accounts, was followed. Thus, the second profile represents a user interested in public affairs and non-mainstream, non-commercial topics. The construction of this profile was chosen as Instagram is a platform with diverse content, as there is an increase in Instagram use by politicians, alternative media, movements, activists, NGOs, etc. (see pages 26-27, 74 for more details). Although Instagram may be seen as a platform for entertainment, social and political organizations and people devoted to social causes may choose the platform for several reasons. First of all, the power of image has been proven and practiced since the early days of photography (Cornet et al., 2017). Nowadays, people can exploit this power through social media based on visual cultures, such as Instagram, to develop image-centered campaigns. For instance, Cornet et al. (2017) have indicated that some social movements exploit Instagram for collective goals in communicating their messages. Secondly, Instagram attracts a young audience that, for instance, activists can influence and educate through its tools, exploiting this dynamic of the platform and focusing on a specific audience. Thirdly, Instagram is a fact of our society and a platform with billions of users. Therefore, mainstream and well-established media, as well as local social movements, choose the platform to spread their content and validate their existence.

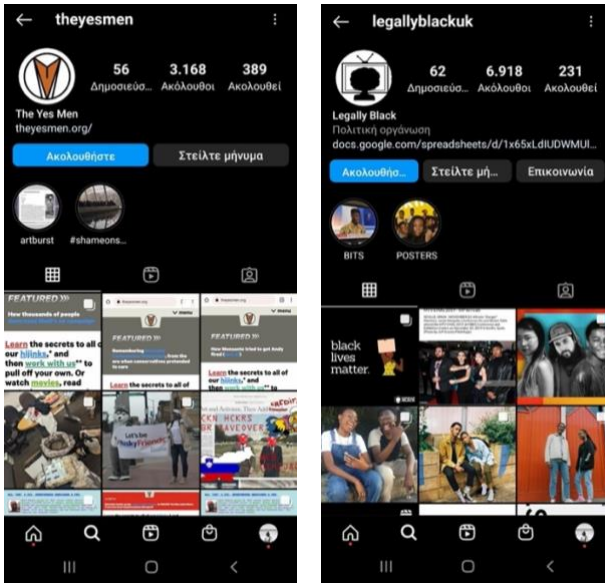


Figure 16 The “The yes men” and “Legally black uk” Instagram accounts

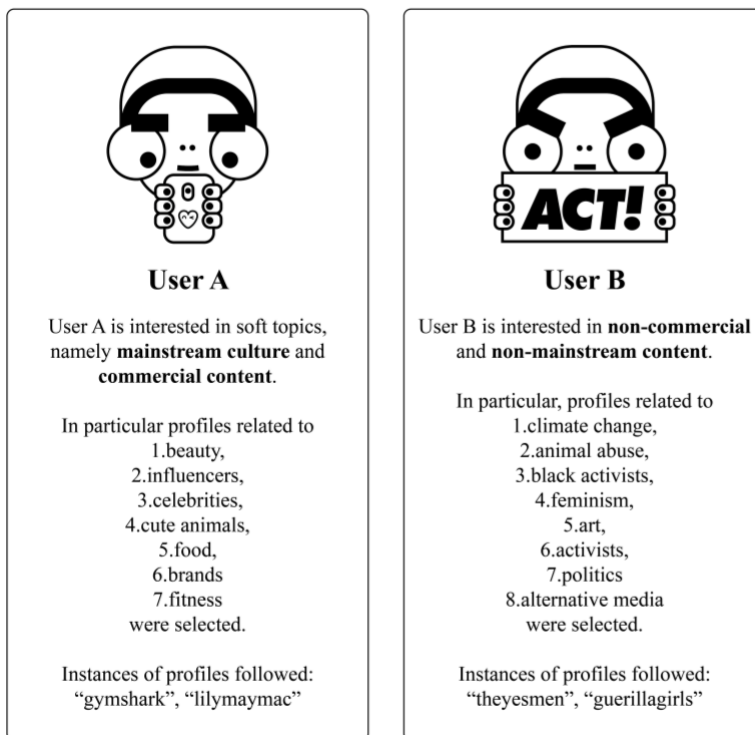


Figure 17 The main characteristics and interests of the profile owners behind two constructed accounts

Both accounts’ recommendations were collected. The posts appearing in the first two scrolls on the Explore page of each account were gathered. Screenshots were taken of each image and video, also keeping track of their order (see Figure 12 for more details). In total, I gathered 474 images from both accounts. The data collection ended when saturation was reached; namely, no more new and distinct material showed up. In particular, a specific pattern of topics and proportion of mainstream and non-mainstream content was observed in both accounts.

Next, qualitative content analysis was conducted, applying an open coding process to the collected data (see Pennington, 2017), as in the case of the Audit study 1 (see pages 78-79). The specific analysis focuses on the topics of each image and video, analyzing what it is represented in each image and video and marking each post's commerciality. A multi-coder analysis could not be applied in the audit studies' content, due to limited resources, which is considered a limitation of the current study. However, the codes regarding each post's thematic category were easily enacted, as there was much evidence on the surface of the visual content. After the analysis, three broad thematic categories emerged related to a. soft, mainstream and commercial topics, b. non-commercial topics and c. unspecified topics. The unspecified category contains all topics whose categorization was unclear and that did not fit any of the previously mentioned categories (e.g., the profile of the Embassy of Kazakhstan). For an indicative illustration of the recommendations and their analysis see Appendix 6. All recommendations gathered from both accounts, together with their notes and analysis, can be found in the following link: <https://bit.ly/3oR4nQ1>.

5.5.2 Audit #2 results

5.5.2.1 *The filter bubble of the spectacle*

The analysis of the content of User A's Explore page indicates that the recommendations follow the user's preferences. More specifically, 233 out of the 237 posts (98%) in the sample were related to soft topics, namely consumerism and brands, entertainment, appearance and ideal life, which are analyzed in detail below. One image that was related to a non-mainstream topic (0,4%), namely autism, appeared on the first day of the data collection. Three posts were grouped under the "unspecified" category (1,6%). The latter contains two users' accounts and a photograph depicting an animal.

These findings show that a filter bubble of mainstream and commercial content clearly appears, narrowing down the stimuli to soft topics for mass consumption. In total, User A received only one image unrelated to their interests, indicating that personalized algorithms do fulfill their purpose by providing users with information closely related to their proclaimed interests. The image related to autism appeared on the first day of the data collection. After this, while the continuous selection of soft topics enriched User A's history, no similar topics emerged, limiting users' choices to those related solely to their interests. The 233 images recommended to User A represent an ideal lifestyle where brands and consumerism prevail, resembling what Guy Debord introduced as the spectacle (see Debord, 1967/2002). Debord asserts that "in societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived is now merely represented in the distance" (1967/2005, p. 7), demonstrating a connection among economy, capitalism and the

spectacle. In the spectacle, media bombard audiences with images representing an ideal life that is far removed from one's actual everyday life. Representation becomes more important than actual living, as capitalism has occupied social life, generating to people the aspiration to work to fulfil the imposed wants. The spectacle can be seen as an instrument of the economy that generates pseudo-needs and new desires. A vast number of photographs that appeared in User A's feed belonged to brands, various categories of influencers or promoters of luxurious experiences, celebrities, and attractive users with perfect bodies. Thus, during the one month long data collection, User A came across images depicting an ideal reality with expensive clothes, amazing landscapes, happy and heteronormative families and couples. Many of the objects surrounding these personas had a price tag depicting an everyday life organized around the needs of the dominant economy. In Debord's views of the spectacle, the commodity has succeeded in totally colonizing social life (Debord, 1967/2002, p. 37); in a similar vein, User A received content that represented various trivial everyday moments, from meals to family gatherings, with latent commerciality, representing a reality where a strong market logic has spread across several aspects of the everyday.

Thus, on the content revealed to User A, a positive ambiance is created, while the platform's algorithm disregards topics that may trigger concerns about the complexities of everyday life, defusing contradictions (see Debord, 1988/1998). A good illustration of this is that no post related to current affairs, at the time of data collection, emerged in the feed, such as topics related to Covid-19, the Beirut explosion and the United States presidential election. Thus, user A is urged to engage with fitness tips and celebrity profiles, but does not receive even a small proportion of content related to more non-commercial topics that could increase diversity. Another reality, a simulacrum, is constructed, comprised of advertisements, commodification, and trivial concerns, possibly manufacturing false desires and interests (Armano & Briziarelli, 2017). In short, we can see a filter bubble of the spectacle emerging.

By the same logic, we would expect to encounter another homogeneous sphere created through Instagram to fit the second user's interests (User B), namely politics, social issues, activism etc., given that personalized algorithms tend to reflect users' preferences. However, in the second case, a "reverse filter bubble" did not appear. Overall, 232 pictures were gathered from the User B profile, of which 120 belonged to non-commercial topics (52%) related to social causes, 92 were categorized as soft topics (40%) and 20 images were grouped into the "unspecified" category (8%).

The differences between the first two categories are crucial. Although the user's interests focus on sociopolitical issues, even in radical forms, such as anarchy and anticapitalism, the recommendations by the Instagram algorithm still contained a relatively high number of images related to celebrities, gossip, influencers, and beauty. Thus, a question arises: is the feed ordered according to users' preferences or according to the platform's own logic? Despite the

fact that the user's history was constantly being loaded and fortified by the researcher's actions, ignoring the recommendations of soft topics and focusing on non-mainstream topics, the user continued to receive images related to soft topics in the course of the entire analysis period (see Figure 18). User B did receive recommendations related to non-mainstream and non-commercial topics. These recommendations were almost the same amount as those related to soft topics. A possible explanation is that alternative posts and accounts may be fewer on Instagram; still, the fact that they are underrepresented generates a vicious circle.

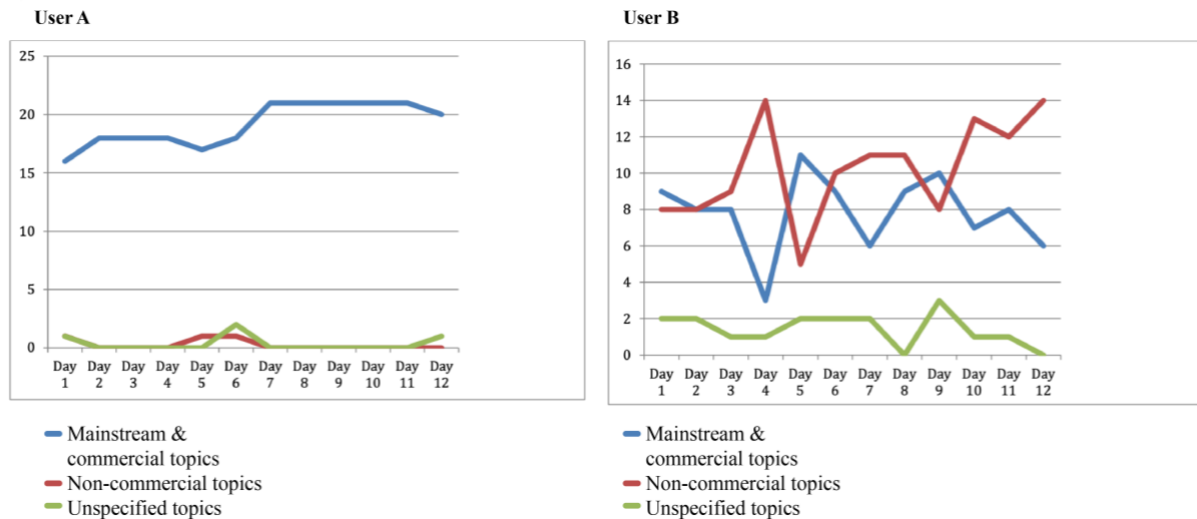


Figure 18 Topics during the data collection

Eli Pariser (2011, p. 11) claimed that “if we never click on the articles about cooking, or gadgets, or the world outside our country’s borders, they simply fade away”; yet in this case, although the user never clicked on soft and commercial topics, they were still prominent in the feed, raising concerns about the non- or under-representation of diverse topics. In the algorithmic world of Instagram, it seems that more complex issues and the realities of diverse social groups are less likely to be present in users’ feeds. The algorithm urges individuals to engage with more mainstream content, which may be more appealing and profitable for the company than an activist group, as it may keep users on the platform for more extended periods of time. At the same time, it creates and promotes a space for businesses that also pay to be advertised on the platform, maintaining Instagram’s economy. These results also confirm the concerns of users themselves, as revealed in the study of Skrubbeltrang et al. (2017). In brief, the study showed that the domination of advertisements and brands and the disregard of independent subcultures by the platform were users’ two main worries regarding Instagram. Indeed, it seems that products or paid services dominate the platform while subcultures are neglected. As Bucher has argued (2018, p. 3), commenting on algorithmic politics,

realities are never given but brought into being and actualized in and through algorithmic systems. In analyzing power and politics, we need to be attentive of the way in which some

realities are always strengthened while others are weakened and to recognize the vital role of nonhumans in co-creating these ways of being in the world.

In the case of Instagram, it seems that a reality related to the spectacle prevails.

5.5.2.2 *The Instagram lifeworld*

The non-commercial content that User B received (N=120 images) could be interpreted to reflect the *lifeworld* (Habermas, 1985), i.e. the domains of actions characterized by social interaction and cooperation. These posts reflect topics related to a world that is actually experienced, e.g. accounts linked to social causes, movements and news. In total, User B was recommended 120 images related to ones interests. More specifically, 14 categories of specific topics emerged, such as environment, news, political figures, etc. (see Table 4).

TOPICS	NUMBER OF IMAGES
news (Covid-19, Donald Trump, the Beirut explosion, politics)	46 (CNN, Ajplus, Huffpost, Nowthisnew, The Guardian, Worldeconomicforum (1), The Daily Beast)
informative posts	8
environment	6 popular media 5 other media
black people	6
political figures	5
users' empowerment	5
activism	5 celebrities-activist 1 activist
feminism	6
alternative users and anti-Donald Trump profile	4 alternative users 4 anti-Trump profile
LGTB	4
UNICEF	4 UNICEF 2 UNICEF-Covid
satire - current affairs	3
animal	1
art	1

Table 4 Topics emerged on the recommendations of User B

First and foremost, the vast majority of images dealt with news (see Table 4) and thus brought User B up to date regarding current affairs and matters besetting society, such as news related to Donald Trump, Covid-19, black people, Beirut explosion and politics. Although User B had expressed their interest to lie more with alternative and unpopular sources, CNN, NBS news, Huffington post and other mainstream media sources dominated in the recommendations and news updates, while gossip and celebrity news also appeared several times. The two remaining

images, which did pertain to popular media, came from accounts publishing only positive news without political references. The first profile was most popular, with 1.8 million followers; the second had 326 K followers and simultaneously promoted its online store through which one can buy t-shirts and hoodies. Six images from the environment category also were distributed by mainstream popular media, such as CNN climate and Bloomberg green, and only five accounts belong to non-institutional users. The latter profiles had high numbers of followers; profiles with lower metrics did not appear. The results, thus, suggest that the content for User B's feed mainly came from well-established and popular accounts which had a large following, indicating that although Instagram appears to be recommending information regarding social causes, these recommendations are made within the confines of popularity, commerciality, and capitalism.

Algorithms, through prioritization, ranking and ordering, emphasize and bring attention into certain things, sources and perspectives at the expense of others (Diakopoulos, 2013, p. 4). In the case of Instagram a tendency towards a spectacular point of view seems to prevail. However, even though the results reveal that the Instagram algorithms tend to favor popular, institutional and well-established sources, the posts shown to User B also displayed some images representing more alternative views, for instance, six accounts regarding feminism and six accounts about black people (N=230) were recommended (see Table 4), confirming that diverse content exists on Instagram. Five images, coming from three popular accounts devoted to empowering people, also came up. These accounts were quite popular, for instance one of them has 1.8 million followers. Yet, these were very limited – only five images appeared out of 230. The platform also suggested activists' profiles to User B, but five out of six suggestions could be referred to as celebrity activists' accounts. Four images in the sample were posted by ordinary users who expressed a more alternative voice, got involved with current affairs and politics and enjoyed quite a big follower base. In addition, posts by the fifth user whose profile was publicly presented to be against Donald Trump, appeared four times. These profiles were critical of the former president of the United States; this fact, along with accounts of political figures that appeared in the feed (e.g. Hillary Clinton and Mark Kelly), fortifies the impression that User B received content against Donald Trump.

5.5.2.3 The construction of the Instagram Spectacle

Algorithms are utilized to visualize, in a way that is meaningful for users, the endless data gathered in each platform. Thus, they make a series of decisions regarding what will be recommended or how it will be sorted. Platforms through their algorithms and their design are involved in the making of reality, as “life is not merely infused with media but increasingly takes place in and through an algorithmic media landscape” (Bucher, 2017, p. 1), determining in a way how the world looks like and to what information users are exposed. Hence, the way in which algorithms prioritize data contributes to the representation of life in specific ways and

not in others. Therefore, it is crucial to focus on the content that algorithms promote constructing the Instagram spectacle.

In the Explore page, User A was recommended 233 images in total that were related to mainstream and commercial content, namely to the spectacle. These photographs were organized into thematic categories and qualitatively analyzed in order for the Instagram spectacle to be deconstructed and investigate how it is represented, what desires and needs it can possibly generate, and what is rendered most prominent. To that point, it is important to mention that the categories that emerged through the analysis are aligned with some of the most popular ones on Instagram (see Igor, 2022), representing the commercialization of various aspects of everyday life while the aestheticization of everyday life is also prominent in the recommended posts. In particular, the pictures were related to three broad topics: i. *fitness and physical appearance*, ii. *lifestyle*, and iii. *leisure*. Below, the three categories are analyzed to explore the Instagram spectacle.

i. Fitness and physical appearance, the ideal looks: be beautiful, healthy and fit

Many of the pictures User A encountered each day of the data collection, were related to fitness and physical appearance. Human body seems to be presented in a specific way in the platform, as each person on the pictures related to physical appearance had a specific shape, namely a slim but athletic figure. In particular, images were appearing representing people with ideal bodies who strive to build the most sculpted muscles accompanied by motivating tips and instructions (see Figure 19).

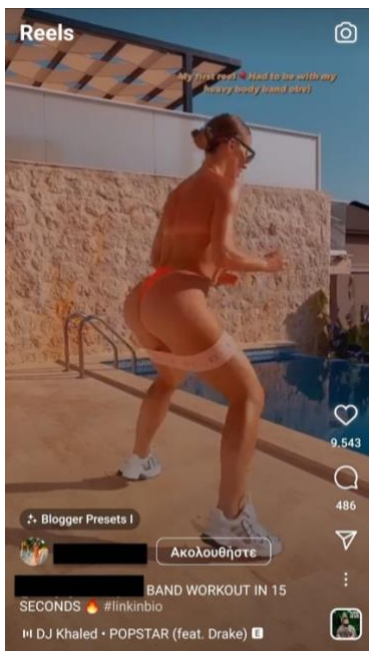


Figure 19 Indicative illustration of a recommended image related to fitness and physical appearance

These images also invoked individuals to pursue an ideal look through a series of guidelines that existed below the images, such as how to flatten your stomach faster and slim your legs. The Instagram platform daily recommended such content on User A, implicitly reminding the user its significance. Given the continuous recommendations related to appearance on Instagram, it is reasonable to assume that “beauty,” as it is conceptualized by the promoted content, constitutes a priority inside the platform, possibly affecting users’ priority outside of it as well. On Instagram, there are many accounts that promote alternative body shapes, embracing diversity, such as the well known “body positive movement.” Although User A was constructed by liking images and following accounts related to fitness, Instagram could possibly recommend these alternative accounts to User A. However, this content did not emerge on the recommendations.

In addition, it is also important to mention that what lies behind all this content is a commercial industry that makes profits by promoting a specific lifestyle and selling products or services. For instance, many of these accounts also advertise their online shops, services, such as personal training and fitness programs, subscriptions or even other companies through product placements with tags, hashtags and swipe ups. Therefore, individuals continuously receive stimuli about the significance of appearance i.e. to become more desirable and good-looking. In addition, each image contains call for actions, such as “follow us for the best daily health and calorie intake guides,” so as to engage people more and increase accounts’ visibility.

On the other hand, it can be argued that, despite the commodification and the implicit pressure for a perfect appearance, users may be also motivated to adopt a healthy lifestyle. Several accounts offer programs and tips, engaging users in fitness. However, the incentive behind this is vague. The multitude of accounts and photographs devoted to this topic implies an urge toward continuous improvement. Attractiveness is determined by a specific appearance, an aesthetic uniformity that these accounts represent. Thus, users should look attractive, but in the right and acceptable way. The physical appearance, the perfect athletic body and even the healthy lifestyle becomes a trend and a promotional tool of the self, as users can be exposed to and, at the same time, they can “advertise” through the platform. What Baudrillard (1993, p. 23) argued two decades ago describes what Instagram’s content expresses: “What is sought today is not so much health, which is an organic equilibrium, as an ephemeral, hygienic and promotional radiance from the body – much more a performance than an ideal state.” Taking into account the concept of biopedagogy¹⁴, we can also argue that the responsibility of taking care of one’s body is transferred from medical experts to individuals, who should exercise and follow a healthy lifestyle (see Fotopoulou & O’ Riordan, 2018). This content encourages self-care that is represented as an acceptable and desired conduct in a neoliberal landscape. Broadly,

¹⁴ The processes of learning and training bodies how to live (Fotopoulou & O’ Riordan, 2018, p.1).

the state's role is being confined while individuals are urged to invest in their own education and welfare (Peters, 2001, as cited in Fotopoulou & O' Riordan, 2018, p. 64).

ii. The promoted lifestyle: live “happily”

Instagram's core is everyday life, as the aim of the platform is to provide users a tool to share their everyday moments. Indeed, Instagram users share their trivial moments through the platform. In the case of User A, he/she received a vast number of photographs depicting everyday trivial moments coming from accounts that belong to several categories of popular influencers, such as heteronormative family and couple influencers or promoters of luxurious experiences and life (see Figure 20).

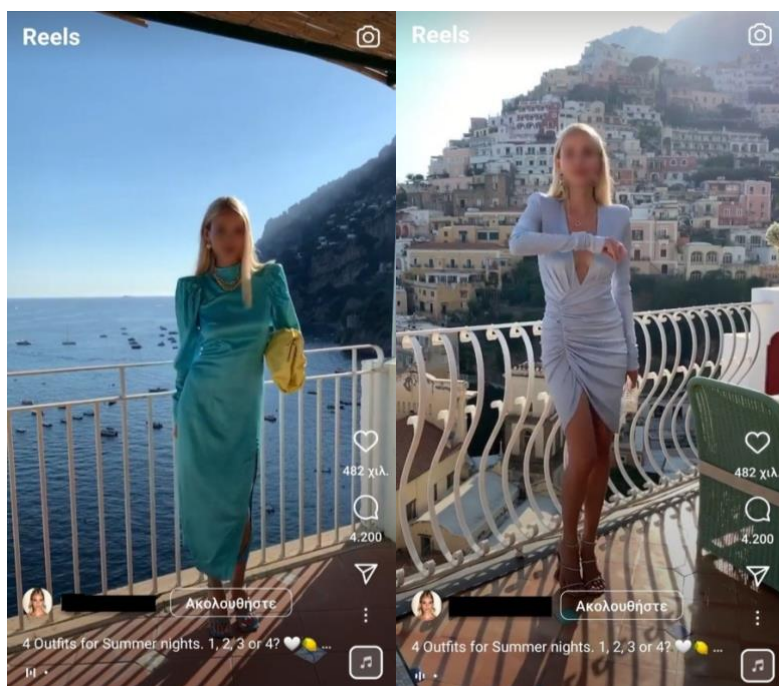


Figure 20 Indicative illustration of a recommended reel¹⁵ from an Influencer and promoter of luxury life

The term “influencer”, namely, “an individual who has the power to affect purchase decisions of others because of his/her authority, knowledge, position or relationship with his/her audience” (Influencer Marketing Hub, n.d),” has become of great importance on Instagram and for some an established career (Abidin, 2017). Usually, these users share their everyday life, also promoting products or services and, therefore, they can affect the buying choices and behavior of ordinary users. Although the recommended images depicted trivial every moments, they were also promotional in a gentle way. In particular, a photograph may present an influencer's family but at the same time when one taps on the screen, brand names emerge (see Figure 21). All these happy moments seem to be achieved by purchasing products or services.

¹⁵ A reel is a 15-second multi-clip video.

For instance, popular influencers seem so excessively content because they visit luxury hotels, eat delicious meals, wear stylish clothes and have beautiful houses. The purchase of stuff seems to pave the way to this ideal happy life while influencers, who usually are “ordinary” users, make this life seem more achievable and accessible for everyone.

Everyday life is transformed into a notion that everyone cares about, but, at the same time, is commercialized. For instance, family Labrant, whose account emerged many times in the feed of User A, not only has 1.4 m followers but also has a number of fan Instagram pages created by ordinary users. Each kid of the family has their own profile on Instagram, even the newborn, whose profile is followed by 1.7 million users. These accounts are offered for paid promos, as mentioned in their description text. Thus, these influencers promote their everyday life while, at the same time, they gain profits. In her research on family influencers, Abidin (2017, p.7) introduced the term “calibrated amateurism”, referring to a “practice and aesthetic in which actors in an attention economy labor specifically over crafting contrived authenticity that portrays the raw aesthetic of an amateur.” This technique is used by influencers to look more spontaneous, create a rapport with their followers and, as Abidin mentioned (2017, p. 12), to convince followers that “these performers are ‘family’ before ‘Influencers’”. Therefore, influencers promote their personal (once private) moments in a specific way, embracing the notion of self-branding in order to engage with users and increase their visibility and metrics. Through Instagram, the commodification of the self through self-branding techniques and everyday life is valorized, becoming the common ground for every user.



Figure 21 Influencer’s photograph with brand tags

Except for influencers, 17 accounts of celebrities also appeared in User A’s recommendations. As Taylor and Harris (2007, p. 127) stated, “through the cult of celebrity the spectacle ensures that the desire for the false totality of the spectacle remains both constant and unsatisfied.”

Nonetheless, although influencers and celebrities have a prominent position on Instagram, we are not aware if users' desires are affected by them.

iii. Leisure as part of capital

The results of the data collection of User A indicate that several images related to food emerged on the Explore feed. Food content has a special place on the platform, as for instance, the #foodporn hashtag is one of the most widespread Instagram hashtags. The images that were recommended to User A depicted meals with eye-catching color combinations, pancakes accompanied by a perfect cappuccino and chocolate flowing (see Figure 22).



Figure 22 Indicative illustration of a recommended image depicting food

Food consumption has become aestheticized in specific ways on the platform, becoming part of the representation of life as many users share their meals. On the platform, it seems that some criteria should be met to upload a meal, such as excess proportions, eye-catching combinations and cautiously chosen plate décor. As Tait (2020) claims, Instagram has driven the rise of oversized desserts that do not fit in people's mouths. Food is presented in a way that brings pleasure and satisfaction while revealing to others an enviable everyday life. The food industry has undoubtedly been affected by Instagram, as owners discover opportunities to raise their profits while economic incentives thrive. Restaurants strive to create the most instagrammable food choices, so that their business is promoted by users (Leaver et al., 2020). In addition, food influencers make efforts to gain followers, with the aim of getting highly paid by food companies that want to advertise their products or services. Pleasure becomes even

more a part of the capital, as primary human needs, such as food, are aestheticized and commercialized more and more.

Furthermore, on User A's account, 91 out of 234 photographs were related to shopping. In particular, these images were product advertisements accompanied by price tags, promotional slogans and links to a company's website. It was also observed that some of the images depicting products were steadily promoted by the algorithms by appearing on the top of the first scroll possibly in order to catch users' attention. Instagram is alleged to be a platform where people share their moments and communicate; however, brands constitute a vital part of it.

5.6 Audit #3

5.6.1 Audit #3 methodology

The last audit delves deeper and aims to answer the following questions: *Does a user's history affect the conceptualization of certain topics? Are users trapped in a filter bubble? How easy or difficult it is for a user to "pop" the filter bubble?* (see Figure 12). In order to find an answer to these research questions, I searched for specific keywords in the Explore page through both the profiles of User A and User B simultaneously in order to avoid a possible time effect on the results. The search terms were related to alternative topics, such as "feminism", to specific topic categories, such as "technology", and issues related to sociopolitical realities of the day. The word "party" was also included, as it can refer to both a political group and a celebration. The final search keywords were "feminism," "woman," "crisis," "technology," "black," "body," "virus," and "party."

The search results, namely the recommended profiles as well as their ranking, were collected for both User A and User B. In particular, I took screenshots of the first six recommended profiles for each keyword for both accounts. Thus, I collected approximately 36 recommendations for each keyword. Then, I checked each recommended account from a third device and user account in order to avoid influencing User A and User B's profile history. The process started on August 29, 2020, and was completed on December 11, 2020. During this period, recommendations were collected on six different days (29/8, 6/10, 13/10, 2/11, 26/11, 11/12) so as to increase the possibility of getting diverse content. The profiles were then analyzed through qualitative content analysis and compared. In particular, each account was analyzed regarding its topic and commerciality, and the order of appearance. The data gathered are inserted in an online excel file, which can be found in the following link: <https://bit.ly/3zf2G3g>. Appendix 7 presents some indicative illustrations of the data collected as well as of the analysis. My aim was to investigate how easy (or difficult) the platform renders for users with a specific online behavior to come across specific non-mainstream and non-commercial content. In addition, this design allowed me to explore how the algorithm

conceptualizes specific topics, such as technology, body and feminism, according to particular user histories. Ultimately, the possibility of users being trapped within a “filter bubble” was investigated on Instagram by comparing system recommendations. The third and final step was to explore how easy (or difficult) it is for a user profile focused on soft topics to “pop” the filter bubble, through the use of active search.

5.6.2 Audit #3 results

The findings indicate that in several occasions, the outcomes of the searches carried out between User A and User B were similar. For example, when searching content with the keyword “feminism,” profiles related to female empowerment topics, motivational quotes, and groups of people who share a feminist perspective emerged in both accounts, and in several instances both users were recommended the same profiles. Such similarities in the results could possibly be explained by the specific nature of the search term as it can hardly be interpreted into something unrelated to its actual meaning. Both users also received similar recommendations of brands and fitness accounts with a particular representation of the body when searching for the content related to “body” and “woman.” Although User B first received some results related to the famous body positive movement, these profiles decreased over time and the profiles pertaining to fitness and ideal body types started to dominate the recommended results. In particular, User B was recommended three profiles related to alternative body shapes (N=6) on the first day of the data collection (N=6), one on the second day (N=6), two on the third day (N=6), and on the rest of the days (N=6), only one profile related to body positive movements appeared. Accounts of alternative body shapes also occurred in User A’s results (N=36), but only twice, and in both occasions these accounts were placed at the bottom of the rank.

Responses to search queries with the keywords “crisis” and “black,” however, brought different results for User A and User B. On both occasions the recommendations were aligned with each profile’s history. When typing in the word “black,” User A received suggestions of fashion influencers, girl bands, products, cars, etc., while User B received mostly recommendations of movements that support black people. In particular, User B received only two recommendations related to a brand and an influencer during the entire collection period (N=36). When using the word “crisis” as a search term, climate change related results dominated suggestions of User B (18 out of 36). In addition, one account related to gay men’s health crisis, two related to the human crisis, one about an NGO helping refugees, and one about EU funded humanitarian aid actions were also recommended. On the other hand, User B received nine recommendations related to soft topics, namely two promotional accounts and some entertaining profiles. User A received irrelevant, generic results about nails, cartoons, and music, and just two related to more alternative profiles. The first profile was related to the crisis in Venezuela and the second one was related to a group whose aim is to bring language

access to asylum seekers. When typing in the most ambiguous of the search terms, namely “party,” User B did encounter 17 accounts related to political parties, but also, similar to User A, whose feed was full of event planners, also received recommendations of party planners (see Figure 23 and Figure 24).

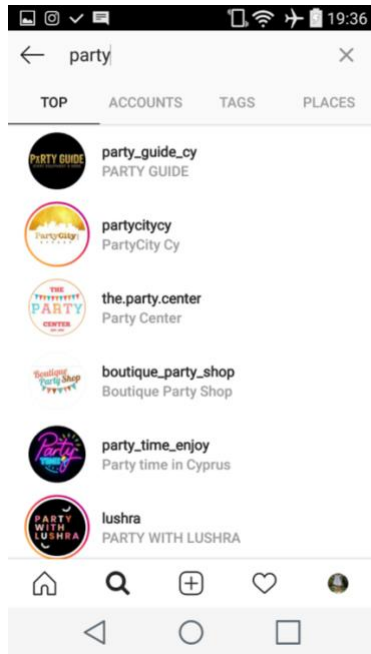


Figure 23 User A’s recommendations for the “party” keyword (Day 2 of the data collection)

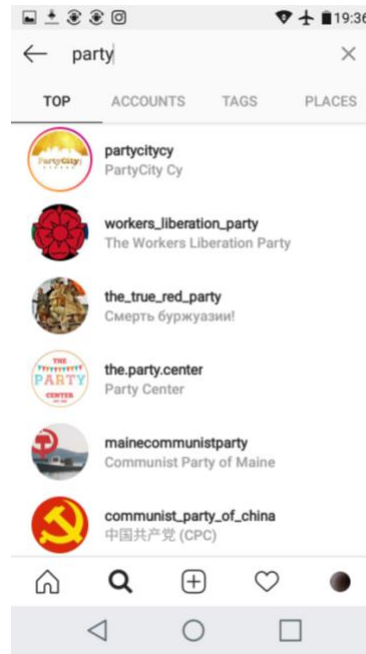
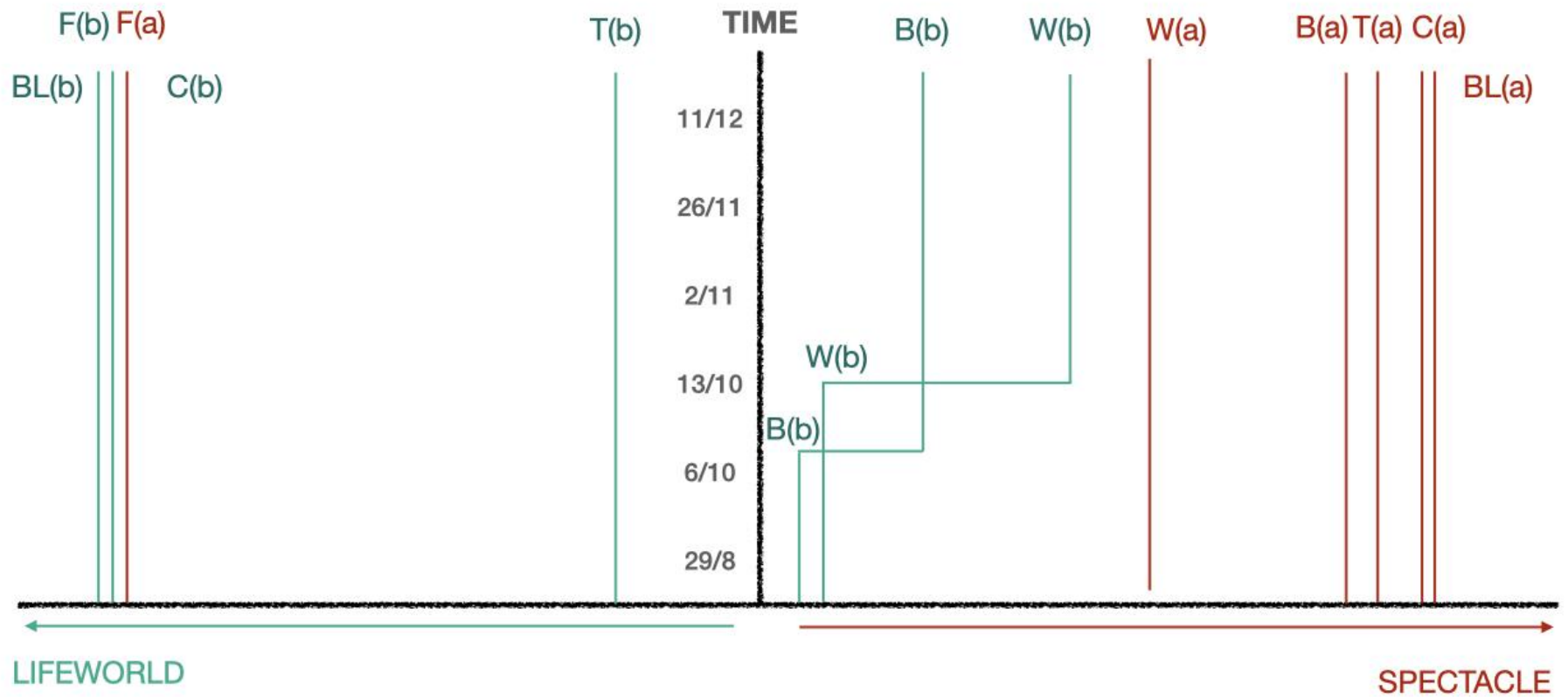


Figure 24 User B’s recommendations for the “party” keyword (Day 2 of the data collection)

The latter finding, however, could be interpreted as an indication of the existence of the spectacle which aims to distract users from social concerns, pushing them towards consumerism (see Debord, 1967/2002). The findings also revealed that User A was solely recommended business accounts, while User B was also recommended commercial content, despite the fact that their history was unrelated to commercial interests. However, it is also significant that in User B’s results, a high number of recommendations were related to politics reflecting the user’s alternative and political interests. The search word “technology” wielded results following more or less similar pattern. In particular, in User A’s account, technology is presented through fun content and brands. In fact, several profiles are devoted to informing users about the news of big technology companies like Apple and Samsung. On the other hand, User B’s results include recommendations from more informative profiles such as “Guardian Tech,” “Technology and Physics” and “MIT Technology Review.” Although user B received non-commercial information, technology firms and brands also were recommended.

Taking everything into account, it was somewhat difficult for User A to come across content unrelated to soft topics. The only case that this user received many non-mainstream recommendations was when searching for “feminism”, indicating that a filter bubble exists.

The findings of my study suggest that even when a user with a history related to soft topics actively searches for different content, the search results are still mainly related to their activity and interests. However, User A received a minor number of recommendations related to alternative topics, such as in the case of the words “crisis” and “body,” which were not attuned to their interests. Although User B received more diverse content through keyword searches, for the terms “body” and “woman” the search terms lead also in his case to commercial and mainstream topics, indicating that commercial sources are more likely to be suggested by the algorithms, even when a person’s interests and previous history would suggest otherwise. Relying on such findings one could claim that User A is trapped into a filter bubble of the spectacle, as algorithms render it challenging to come across other perspectives, while user B received more diverse suggestions related both to lifeworld and the spectacle. However, over time user B’s recommendations resembled more the spectacle category in specific keywords (see Figure 25). Figure 25 represents the recommendations’ fluctuation regarding the type of content (namely content related to spectacle or lifeworld) of specific keywords during the data collection for both accounts. For instance, at the beginning of the data gathering of the word “body,” User B received suggestions that included almost the same number of accounts related to lifeworld and the spectacle. Still, over time, the suggestions related to the spectacle were increased. On the other hand, regarding the keyword “body,” User A was recommended the same number of recommendations pertaining to the spectacle and lifeworld over time.



keywords: feminism (F), crisis (C), black (BL) body (B), woman (W), technology (T)

profile A (a)

profile B (b)

Figure 25 The results of Audit #3 over time

5.7 Discussion

The findings of the audit studies indicate that Instagram users are relatively likely to encounter more mainstream and commercial content regardless of their interests. First and foremost, without use history, algorithms endorse and bring into attention posts created by business profiles with high metrics, namely many followers and likes, promoting their services and products. Although alternative accounts related to social causes have also been gaining fame on the platform over the last few years, Instagram does not recommend these kinds of topics by default. A possible explanation may be that the images recommended to users have followed marketing strategies, such as a call for action or the use of hashtags and especially popular ones, and Instagram seems to “reward” them. Users with a tendency to follow soft topics are, thus, more likely to be enclosed in a filter bubble of the spectacle. They encounter entertaining posts presenting an ideal reality surrounded by brands. As Debord claimed (1967/2005, p. 15) “the illusory paradise that represented a total denial of earthly life is no longer projected into the heavens, it is embedded in earthly life itself. The spectacle is the technological version of the exiling of human powers into a ‘world beyond’.” Users with more diverse interests, however, are also urged to engage with mainstream content following Instagram’s personalized suggestions entrapping them into a filter bubble that consists of mainstream, commercial topics presenting an ideal life full of opportunities for material consumption, where satisfaction equates with commodities and is turned into an ideal representation of consumer society. According to Debord (1967/2002, p. 28):

The spectacle is a permanent opium war designed to force people to equate goods with commodities and to equate satisfaction with a survival that expands according to its own laws. Consumable survival must constantly expand because it never ceases to include privation.

In addition, I found that users cannot easily “escape” the bubble: when User A actively searched for specific keywords like “black”, “party” or “body”, algorithms suggested content mainly related to their interests, in contrast to User B who received more diverse outcomes, for instance, recommendations to accounts that amplify the voices of black people. Therefore, it is most difficult for users to “pop” the filter bubble and find information unrelated to their interests, especially if they are attuned to mainstream topics. However, it is significant to mention that through the active search for topics (Audit #3), the recommendations related to non-mainstream and non-commercial accounts were more prominent than in the case of Audit #1 and Audit #2, where the algorithm was the only responsible actor in recommending content to users. In particular, in Audit #2, User A received solely one recommendation related to alternative content. In contrast, in Audit #3, the user received, for instance, four non-mainstream suggestions related to the word “body” and two related to “crisis”. This output may have been affected by the keywords that were used during the search, such as feminism and

crisis, which can more easily be related to alternative topics, but also by the commercialization of some alternative topics, such as the body positive movement (see Cwynar-Horta, 2016). However, comparing these results to Audit #2 can indicate that it is crucial for users to take action to receive more diverse content.

Kevin Systrom, the co-founder of Instagram, mentioned years ago: “I want to see not just content from my friends but my morning news on Instagram, from multiple channels”; “to be the place I learn about the world” (Kiss, 2013). But which aspect of the world does Instagram present? It seems that his vision has not been fulfilled, as the platform mostly promotes an ideal reality, neglecting social issues and news through which users would learn about the world. The emergence of a *filter bubble of the spectacle* can have several repercussions. Firstly, following the ideas of Debord (1967/2002, p. 20), the more of a spectator one becomes, the less one lives, as the less they understand their lives and desires identifying their needs through the dominant images. Being constantly bombarded with goods such as expensive cars, stylish clothes, ultimate travel destinations and high-tech gadgets on Instagram, may thus have an impact on people’s needs and “desire for more” (see Grosser, 2014). The spectacle on Instagram can therefore be seen as an instrument of capitalism, driving users towards consumer society, generating pseudoneeds. Individuals are urged to be immersed in contemplating the images proposed by the dominant system and capitalism, living the lives of others, a life full of products, instead of understanding their real desires and needs. When Instagram introduced the personalized algorithm in 2016, mentioned that users will encounter the moments Instagram believes that users care about the most. According to O’ Meara (2019, p. 1), this statement reflects the “users as consumers of content” priority, while this content seems to be conducive to capitalist interests. According to Debord (1967/2002, p. 22), “the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images.” This statement described, at that time, a new mode of capital where society moved from industrial capitalism to a consumer society. Nowadays, consumer capitalism is incarnated on Instagram, where corporate platforms have even more opportunities to silently penetrate individuals’ lives. This is possibly why Instagram has become such a robust corporate tool. It seems that the economy and the contemporary spectacle are inseparably connected, creating a spectacle controlled by capitalism even more (see Debord, 1962). Both accounts’ recommendations, especially User A’s suggestions, consisted of brands, businesses and users who sell products and services. Instagram posited that users become more interested in a brand when they see ads for it on the platform, while 83% of users discover new ones on the Explore page (see Instagram, n.d.-b). Instagram exploits these statistics to attract more business profiles and by extent profits. Thus, by constantly encountering this type of content, users are more likely to discover a brand or make a purchase, possibly affecting their desires and needs attuning to capitalism. Consumerism is intensified while the platform raises its profits. User A encountered content that represents an enormously positive and promising reality where capitalism reigns, urging users to engage with brands instead of the reality surrounding them, privileging a specific aspect of everyday life, one in

which leisure is transformed into a time devoted to consumerism (see Smythe, 1977). Instagram commercial accounts embrace and promote positive content so as to drive users to engage more with their brands (Mazzarolo, Mainardes, & Innocencio, 2021). In addition, being exposed to standardized content, users are urged to reproduce commercial and mainstream content (see Abidin, 2016b). At the same time, this may limit their creativity (see Barker, 2018), as algorithmic culture “sort[s], classif[ies], and hierarchiz[ies] people, places, objects, and ideas, and also the habits of thought, conduct, and expression that arise in relationship to those processes” (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016, p. 119). As Debord claimed (1967/2002, p. 14), there is a shift from being into having and from having into appearing. It does not matter who individuals are or even what they possess; it matters how they appear to be, and Instagram provides a paradigm to be reproduced, as “the passive acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply” (Debord, 1967/2002, p. 12). This bubble contains standardized content, a reproducible, ideal, and positive lifestyle that can lead to a “daily passivity manufactured and controlled by capitalism” (Debord, 1962, p.6).

Secondly, questions are raised regarding the extent to which non-popular accounts have the possibility to disseminate their content and reach a broader audience. User B consistently viewed radical content on Instagram and did not like or click on any post unrelated to ones interests. Nevertheless, 92 images related to commercial topics were recommended to her/him, and several of the 120 images related to the *lifeworld* were derived from well established, popular, and mainstream media sources. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that users who make mixed choices on Instagram but are still interested in topics related to the lifeworld may receive even fewer non mainstream and alternative suggestions.

This study also confirmed the significant role of popularity in content dissemination, as the most common topics that emerged in the collected data were related to the most popular hashtags and topics of Instagram at the time of data collection. In addition, in Audit #1 and Audit #2, popular business accounts that leveraged much-advertised marketing strategies emerged on the Explore page, possibly at the expense of non-commercial content that does not follow marketing tips. Non-commercial profiles can also exploit these strategies, but this means that their content should be redefined and follow specific guidelines, sometimes jeopardizing their aim (see Afnan et al., 2019; Brathwaite & DeAndrea, 2021). In addition, business profiles are provided with tools, such as advanced Instagram insights, statistics, and metrics, in order to develop a better strategy, while non-commercial profiles and user accounts do not usually have such analytics at their disposal.

Although Instagram is a commercial platform, its very content is created not only by businesses but also by ordinary users and individuals who want to leverage the platform to express themselves or even bring about social change. Users may produce and resist invisibility without

rejecting the system and making their actions visible (see de Certeau, 1984). A problematic aspect of the Debordian spectacle was that individuals were excluded from its production, as they were just receivers and spectators of the spectacle. Nowadays, users can participate in its formation. However, Instagram seems to reward users with visibility who embrace an effective neoliberal subject, as Marwick (2013, p. 13) stated, referring to a subject who “attends to fashion, focused on self-improvement, and purchases goods and services to achieve self-realization. He/she is comfortable integrating market logics into many aspects of life, including education, parenting, and relationships.” To conclude on a more positive note, although we might expect more diverse content to be recommended to User B due to the logic of personalization, the penetration of non-mainstream content in a commercial platform can be seen as an opportunity for users to break the mainstream bubble and undermine the spectacle, even in a hugely commodified sociotechnical environment such as Instagram. In addition, users can resist and negotiate the platform’s power. A good illustration of that is the Instagram profile of the Palestinian lawyer Lara who utilized the title “skincare” to manipulate the algorithm and promote a live video presenting the updates from Gaza during the Israeli and Palestinian conflict (see <https://www.instagram.com/p/CO-ctIXoXQ0/>). In this case, she capitalized on how the platform works, trying to leverage its algorithms and turning it into an advantage for her. Thus, the question is how easy is it for users to deny the possibility for popularity, fame and participation and dissociate themselves from the spectacle or even subvert it?

6. #Study 3: Exploring user agency

6.1 Introduction to the study

Instagram promotes a specific use of itself, enacting specific subject positions of Instagram users (Gehl, 2014; Introna, 2016), as has been articulated in the previous chapters. The platform's design, affordances and algorithms steer users towards specific user subjectivities and content. However, users can react and resist, developing their own tacit tactics against the domination of power (de Certeau, 1984). Accordingly, based on the results of the two previous studies, as well as on Guy Debord's concept of the spectacle and de Certeau's approach to agency, the third empirical inquiry aims to investigate users' perspectives, beliefs, feelings and practices concerning Instagrammers' subjectivities. Therefore, the following research questions are posed: *Do users adopt Instagram norms? Do users follow, subvert or negotiate the Instagrammer "in-scribed" or hegemonic subjectivity? How do they act and what do they think silently and invisibly?*

6.2. Methodology

A qualitative study was held in order to explore users' perceptions, feelings, and practices, based on in depth semi-structured interviews with Instagram users. Interviews permit a detailed and in-depth investigation of the subject and, at the same time, allow researchers to explore the individual's perceptions (Mason, 2002). In addition, semi-structured interviews are suited if the researcher "need[s] to ask probing, open-ended questions and want [s] to know the independent thoughts of each individual in a group" (Adams, 2015, p. 494). Through them, researchers can delve and explore totally unforeseen issues following the interview guide. Still, they can also deviate from it by posing new searching questions when they feel it is appropriate and valuable for the research questions (Adams, 2015). Thus, semi-structured interviews allow the investigation of people's beliefs, experiences, feelings, and perspectives, which is the aim of this study.

The method of selection was purposive sampling. According to Maxwell (2012, p. 132), "in this strategy, particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your questions and goals." The selected participants were chosen to warrant variety and bring different perspectives regarding Instagram use and answer the research questions of the current study. One of the goals of purposeful selection is to select individuals who are critical for testing the theories of a study (Maxwell, 2012). Participants with diverse patterns of Instagram use and distinct characteristics can challenge or assert the theory of the society of the spectacle, bringing to light power relations. Thus, the selection of participants was guided by the criterion of diversity. First and foremost,

interviewees were recruited according to their belonging to different groups in terms of age, gender, and socioeconomic background; the latter criterion is essential in the case of the spectacle. Individuals' socioeconomic status can be a means for some users to participate in a conspicuous consumption, while it also may cause rupture, if what is presented is not experienced. In addition, the inability of some users to participate in the Instagram lifestyle may render them more vulnerable to follow and desire what is represented. Therefore, in the sample there is a diversity regarding the profession and the socioeconomic background of users. In particular, business owners or professionally acclaimed individuals were chosen, but also university students, an influencer, freelancers, artists, and people with low-income jobs. Each of them can bring a different perspective about the platform. The participants came from Greece and Cyprus, and their age was between 20 and 38 years old (see Table 5 for more details about the interviewees). In both countries, the platform is especially prevalent among people in their 20ies and 30ies (NapoleonCat, 2020; Statista, 2022b). Thus, I focused on this age group. In addition, minors were excluded from the sample, as a study focusing on teenagers could be an independent study, given the particularities of this age group. Greek and Cypriot users were selected; in Greece, almost half of its entire population uses Instagram (NapoleonCat, 2022a). In the case of Cyprus, 70,3% of the population has an Instagram account (NapoleonCat, 2022b). Instagram is one of the most widespread social media platforms in both countries. In addition, opting for purposive sampling as a method of selection, I was able to start the recruitment of participants by looking at my own network for users who fit the intended criteria and characteristics.

Secondly, the sample included users with various interests and (Instagram) use habits. A first category is users with an intense activity on the platform, measured by the quantity and the frequency of their posts and the number of their followers. These users are expected to be active on Instagram and, perhaps, more vulnerable to the platform's power. A second category of interviewees is users who are involved in NGOs or social movements; these users were included, as they are more likely to appropriate the platform and resist its power. Diverse users and profiles were chosen, namely accounts with content related to everyday moments, brands but also art and social causes. Furthermore, users who could provide interesting and probably new information and a different perspective were also recruited, such as a new Instagram user, one who had deleted the Instagram account and people whose profession depends, to an extent, on the platform for exposure, such as a freelancer musician or a dancer. In order to bring diversity regarding the frequency of sharing information (including posts and stories), I monitored the users' accounts for two weeks before each individual was chosen and asked to participate in an interview, while their metrics were written down and presented in the below Table (see Table 5). Moreover, the participants were questioned regarding their relation to technology and social media in order to represent varying degrees of familiarity with communication technology. Their relation to technology is described by the following scale: *novice*, *average*, *familiar*, and *expert users*. Each user's characteristics and background stories

are presented in Table 5, indicating how they can contribute to the research by bringing varying perspectives and information regarding Instagram use.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Nationality	Occupation	Posts Followers Followees	Frequency of Instagram use	Familiarity with technology	Background Story
Stuart	34	M	Greek	Manager and owner of transportation company	151 389 671	Many times a day	Familiar user	Stuart is interested in watching documentaries and reading articles regarding social media effects. He uses Instagram every day, but he does not produce content very often.
Yiota	20	F	Greek	Undergraduate student	47 155 151	Whenever she wants	Average user	Yiota uploads alternative content on Instagram, such as photographs depicting trash or collages. She does not frequently share images and she usually deletes her profiles creating new ones.
Sam	27	M	Cypriot	Musician, freelancer	804 1.478 1.351	Many times a day	Average user	Sam frequently uploads content related to his everyday life on Instagram. He uses all Instagram affordances, while he also uses his account to promote his work.
Eliza	26	F	Greek	Deputy teacher	94 760 841	X	novice user	At the time of the interview, Eliza had deactivated her account for a month. Before the deactivation, she used to share stories related to everyday life very often.
Maya	29	F	Cypriot	Data Analyst	422 1.195 1.736	Daily	Expert user	Maya is a postgraduate student in data analysis, and she has a degree in Mechanical engineering, thus she is very familiar with technology. She is involved in the field of youth action as an active member of NGOs. She is interested in human rights, the environment, LGBTQ, and gender equality. She frequently uploads content on Instagram related to her interests mentioned above.
Michael	37	M	Greek	Product executive	607 992 935	Many times a day	Expert user	Michael is interested in technology and photography. He loves Instagram and believes it is a vital platform for him. He frequently uploads everyday moments via stories and artistic content related to photography via posts.
Andy	22	M	Cypriot	Influencer/Social media manager	507 6.205 4.106	Many times a day	Familiar user	Andy is an influencer and social media manager. He shares content multiple times a day related to his daily life, while he also gains profit through the platform.
Maria	26	F	Greek	Dancer, freelancer	343 1.458 1.471	Daily	Familiar user	Maria is a dancer who uses Instagram to be promoted in her field of work. She works to earn her livelihood from an early age.
Paul	24	M	Greek	Business owner	2.732 693 978	Daily	novice user	Paul owns a satirical Instagram profile, uploading humorous content. He occasionally uploads content related to everyday life solely via stories.
Kate	26	F	Cypriot	Youth officer	105 390 530	Daily	Average user	Kate is a Youth Officer at a Youth Political Party. She also voluntarily manages the Instagram account of an LGTB community in her country.
Mary	21	F	Greek	Undergraduate student/Waitress	38 370 820	Daily	Average user	Mary often shares content on Instagram, mainly via stories. She has low income and struggles economically. She is interested in animal abuse topics.
Aaron	30	M	Greek	Artist	74 617 739	Many times a day	Familiar user	Aaron is an artist, owning two profiles, a personal and a business one. He uploads artistic content and rarely content related to everyday life.

Ale	26	F	Greek	Architect	13 150 180	Daily	novice user	Ale is a novice Instagram user, using the platform to share her artistic photographs. At the time of the interview, she had owned her account for three months.
Diana	24	F	Cypriot	Art Consultant	Prof A. 214 552 956 Prof B. 23 272 803	Daily	Average user	Diana owns two profiles. Through the first one, she is represented as an artist, while she shares everyday content related to her dog through the second one.
Eleonor	33	F	Cypriot	History teacher, NGO owner	130 795 1.301	Almost every day	Average user	Eleonor shares images mainly through stories. Her content is not related to everyday life, but usually conveys information about crucial public-related topics.

Table 5 List of the interviewees, their characteristics and background stories

The first interviewees who fulfilled the abovementioned criteria were chosen from my social network so as to establish initial links (see Parker, Scott & Geddes, 2019). They were approached through an Instagram direct message, describing the general topic and aim of the research as well as the interview process and the expected duration. The users who agreed to participate gave their informed consent. A pseudonym was given to each participant in order to safeguard anonymity. Some interviewees chose their own pseudonyms, while others wanted their first names to be used on the research. In addition, they were offered the possibility to be provided with the recording and the interview transcript as well as the analysis when completed. Then, in line with the snowball sampling method (Parker et al., 2019), participants were asked to recommend users with the intended characteristics from their own network, who were then subject to the same selection method and criteria described above.

The number of the interviews was defined by the saturation point. Overall, 15 interviews were conducted in Greek language. The interview questions and guide consist of 45 questions that is informed by the findings of the previous studies regarding Instagram’s inscribed subjectivities and the algorithmic function of the platform. The interview guide was slightly altered during the interviews according to some users’ background. For instance, the interviewed influencers were asked questions such as “How did you become an influencer? How did you decide it?”, while the other participants were not asked the same question. The interview guide consists of six sets of questions according to the findings of the first two studies of this research. The first set of questions is general questions aiming to acquire general information about the participants and their Instagram use. In addition, these questions helped interviewees to be gradually introduced to the process. The other sets of questions were related to the four Instagram subjectivities: the passive recipient of content, the producer of spectacular content, the sociable user, and the consumer of commodities and aspiring influencers. Furthermore, the guide also includes a set of questions regarding Instagram algorithms, recommendations, and the spectacle. The interview guide was refined after conducting two pilot interviews with independent responders who were also Instagram users. An indicative sample of the interview questions is presented in Table 6 and the entire interview guide is presented on Appendix 8.

General Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When did you start using Instagram and why? • Do you remember what you first thought about it? Your very first impression? • Which are the main reasons why you use Instagram? • Do you know people who do not use Instagram? What kind of people? Would/do you recommend it to them (and why)? <p>...</p>
The passive recipient of content

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much time do you spend on Instagram per day? • How many times do you visit Instagram per day? (more than once?) • How do you feel when using Instagram? • What do you usually do when you open Instagram? Show me. <p>...</p>
<p>The producer of spectacular content</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of images do you usually upload on Instagram? Why? How much time do you spend when uploading a photograph on Instagram? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What do other people usually upload on Instagram? Would you say that the Instagram content has specific characteristics? • Do you follow any instructions or tips when you upload, edit or capture a photograph? For instance, there are several tips for users available on the internet. • Do you usually use filters on your photographs? Why? Are these specific ones? • How do you feel about taking photographs and uploading them on Instagram? Is this something important to you? <p>...</p>
<p>The sociable user</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you communicate with the others Instagram users? How? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Do you comment on photographs or stories? Do you usually use the predetermined Instagram responses, like stickers? If, yes, why? • Have you ever used the poll or the question tool (create or answer)? How? For which topics? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ For what reasons do you believe that these tools, like poll, can be used? • Have you ever used the hashtag #likeforlike or #followforfollow? Have you ever liked a photograph of someone so as to like back yours or because he liked yours first? • ...
<p>The consumer of commodities and wannabe influencers</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever thought or tried to advertise a brand through Instagram? • Have you ever interacted with a brand on Instagram? Maybe by mentioning its name or something else? • Do you use the “shop section”? If yes, how? • Do you feel that you can discover new brands through Instagram? Do you follow brands or influencers so as to find new products? How important is Instagram for you in terms of shopping? <p>...</p>
<p>The spectacle, algorithms and recommendations</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open your Explore page, what do you believe about the feed and the topics? Are these topics important to you? Do you spend a lot of time on these topics? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Do you believe that all users come across these (or similar) topics on Instagram? ○ Would you say that your feed is tailor-made for you? Your actions, behavior, demographics? • Do you usually follow the recommendations that you find on the Explore page? For instance, do you follow some profiles? How do you find new profiles to follow? (<i>focus on algorithms</i>) • There are several accounts of celebrities and influencers on Instagram. Do you follow any of them? Why? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What do you think about this picture (an ideal picture of an influencer)? How do you feel? • Are you going to continue using Instagram in the near/far future? Why (not)?

Table 6 Sample of interview questions

The average duration of each interview was two hours and was conducted face to face or via video teleconferencing platforms. Each user's profile was beforehand analyzed by the researcher identifying posts that could be used as stimuli for discussion. Given that in qualitative studies, it is most important to establish an effective working relationship with the participants (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003), I followed the methods proposed by Legard et al. (2003). For instance, I expressed my interest and attention; I declared that there were no right or wrong answers and allowed participants to express themselves by providing them with the appropriate time. During the interview, each interviewee was asked to use the Instagram mobile app in order to answer some of the questions and comment on posts of other users as well as their own. At the end of each interview, users were shown the Insta_Repeat Instagram account (see https://www.instagram.com/insta_repeat/?hl=el) and they were asked to share their thoughts about it. The data collection period lasted six months, starting in January 2021 and ending in July 2021. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. As I have mentioned the users were informed that they can have access to these archives and some asked for their recordings. After the end of the interviewees, the participants' Instagram accounts were also monitored for a couple of months so as to better understand these users, their statements and behavior. Users were informed about the monitoring of their profiles and gave their consent. However, before this decision was made, an ethical dilemma had been raised. In particular, by informing users about monitoring, their behavior and actions might be altered and influenced. Nonetheless, I decided to inform users about the profile monitoring. In addition, using posts shared by the interviewees in the section of the findings could have enriched the data presented, enabling a better understanding of quotes and users. However, I decided not to include their content, even though the participants approved that, to avoid revealing their identity.

The data was later analyzed via qualitative thematic analysis, which is recommended for detecting, analyzing, and reporting various themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I did not use software, but I coded manually. Following Braun's and Clarke's (2006, p. 87) six phases of analysis, I first became familiar with the data, reading the transcriptions twice and noting some first ideas and general codes. Based on the interview guide, there were some initial broad categories which helped me to organize the data. Then, reading the transcriptions, I generated some initial codes searching for interesting features in the data and finding data relevant to the codes. Then, I gathered the codes and organized them into possible themes. I went back to the interviews and the codes several times, reading and evaluating them at different points in time. In addition, I refined each theme and generated clear names for each one. The last step was to produce the final report, namely Section 6.3, finding extract examples and going back to the research questions and the related literature. I thoroughly chose the interview quotes so as to represent all participants' perspectives, going back to the transcriptions several times and reading them again. The aim of this analysis is to bring individuals' beliefs, feelings and practices into light regarding Instagram use.

6.3 Findings

6.3.1 Conforming to inscribed users subjectivities

Many of the participants follow the norms that Instagram promotes through its design and affordances, adopting some of the characteristics of the inscribed subjectivities, namely *the passive recipient of content, the producer of spectacular content, the sociable user and the consumer of commodities and aspiring influencers* (see Section 4.3). Design choices, affordances and the feelings this trigger seem to play an essential role in driving users towards the espousal of the ideal Instagram use.

The fact that Instagram is part of users' daily routine brings them closer to the ideal representation of life that is promoted in the platform, as they are exposed to and instinctively consume a vast amount of information related to it. First of all, most interviewees admit that they find themselves scrolling on Instagram purposelessly or even without noticing that they had entered the platform. In particular, the mobile version of the app, the tailor-made content and the fast speed of Instagram's flow of information make them impulsively return to their feed several times a day passively spectating content, such as when they are waiting on the traffic lights, as Michael mentioned. As he said, "I check Instagram umpteen times. I don't know how many times. I may open it when I am waiting on the traffic lights, to scroll and see what is going on there." The very design, i.e. the "nudges" such as the red signs of unseen notifications or stories, urges them to consume more without sometimes pondering over the data they receive. For instance, some interviewees mentioned that when they enter the Explore page to search for something actively, they are lured by the abundance of posts into scrolling and watching videos and photographs forgetting why they entered the page on the first place. Although the active search can sometimes result in more diverse content even in a small proportion, as it was found in Audit #3 (see Section 5.6.2), users are lured by the design and the way the algorithmic page functions. Thus, they fail to take action on the results they encounter following algorithmic recommendations. Paul spends a lot of time scrolling on Instagram describing the process as footling, as when he glances at "the labels of detergents" without feeling that this is something negative. Nonetheless, many interviewees admit that they feel that they waste their time. When the participants were asked about the content they encounter and consume on the platform, the majority of them claimed that Instagram content is solely related to the ideal representation of life, soft topics and self-promotion, ignoring other types of information that may be available. In addition, they acknowledged that many users promote an ideal lifestyle that is far removed from their everyday lives. Sam, as a musician and singer, sees the platform as a means to promote himself as a "brand." Thus, he often uploads photographs in which he looks content and positive regardless his actual mood, mentioning that everyone does the same: "it is not important for the Instagram if a moment happened or

not.” Although users understand that the presented reality may be contrived and unauthentic, they accept it as the way to promote themselves (Sam) or as “the signs of the times”: “we all know that users do things to upload them on Instagram solely, regardless of whether it is real or not” (Michael). At the same time, some of them reproduce this type of content as “this is what all Instagram users do” (Sam). The continuous exposure of users to content related to soft topics and an ideal lifestyle leads to its subsequent normalization, and, at the same time, its propagation.

Users reproduce specific content in the platform so as to construct a “successful” online identity, feel satisfaction and approval, and feel that they belong to the platform’s “community.” In order to achieve that, users produce instagrammable content and reproduce popular topics and aesthetics. Metrics play a crucial role in all these processes:

If I understood that something I had captured wouldn’t get likes, I wouldn’t upload it. We want to influence users. Thus, of course, one would think about which content will engage the other users the most. (Sam)

First of all, users perceive their profiles as a vital way to display their identities and be presented to others. Many of them mentioned that they carefully curate their accounts and especially the permanent posts they upload. According to users, metrics declare the value of their profile, being equated with one’s status. As Andy claimed, “the number of followers is very important, it defines your status and sometimes who you are.” Users feel that they should carefully curate their online image to increase the number of their likes and followers, as this is conducive to their online identity while bringing satisfaction as well. In order to achieve this, they adjust the content they produce to the one they perceive as acceptable in the platform. As Bucher (2012) argued regarding Facebook, users should follow “correct” modes of participation so as to be rewarded with visibility and, in the case of Instagram, with likes, comments and followers that will construct their online presence. Most of the users are aware of the term instagrammable, describing it as the aesthetically acceptable content for the platform which will bring likes and satisfaction and seem to play an essential role on Instagram production. Michael said:

Instagrammable can be a cup of Greek coffee on a metallic table. You know, some posts that we are used to seeing on Instagram. I try to upload instagrammable images to feel satisfaction [...]. I believe that I am trying to capture instagrammable pictures without thinking about it much, as these are the ones that have engagement on the platform.

Other users added that they are attentive to the photograph’s lighting, colors, background, atmosphere, etc., to catch others’ attention; they also believe that self-presence and pets are instagrammable topics. In addition, most of the participants mentioned that Instagram aesthetics include mainly positive content, while some also referred to content depicting a

luxurious lifestyle, like expensive hotels, swimming pools, etc. It seems that what is “Instaworthy” is common knowledge for users, conceptualizing it as instagrammable, being also aware that producing this type of image is vital for gaining traction. Some report having visited a hotel or a restaurant solely to upload it on the platform, indicating that it influences users’ choices, experiences and everyday life. Instagram’s aesthetics is crucial for users so as to build the popular identity they want, reproducing and validating specific content and aesthetics with an emphasis on positivity.

Secondly, the term *instagrammable* is also related to what is perceived as popular on Instagram. It plays an essential role for users in order to raise their own numbers and feel satisfaction. However, it also results in reproducing content related to an ideal lifestyle and soft topics. Kate mentioned:

For me what is instagrammable has been formed through the most successful accounts, the most popular ones. I used to notice their content and try to create similar images on my profile.

The participants mentioned that everyone reproduces popular content on Instagram, even sometimes unconsciously, to gather likes. Andy, as an influencer, tends to save popular images of other influencers so as to reproduce similar poses and aesthetics when he wants to share a picture. Popular content seems essential for users in order to construct a “successful” and “acceptable” online identity that will ensure the rise of their metrics.

The sense of belonging is also a factor that drives users to reproduce instagrammable and popular content. Two participants mentioned:

If users claim that their content isn’t affected by the popular one, I think they are just wrong. I don’t know... Instagram is just a place that everyone wants to belong. So, we notice what is more acceptable and popular and follow and reproduce it. (Stuart)

Everyone has uploaded landscapes and meals, which is the most common thing that everyone shares on Instagram. This is the trend. (Eliza)

This feeling is fulfilled through other users’ approval which is often declared by the number of likes, reactions and comments. Thus, according to the interviewees, they follow and reproduce trending topics that are usually related to positive vibes, food, pets, and self-representation. Although Stuart does not care much about metrics and popularity, he also claimed, “if you post your meal, a beautiful landscape or your pet, you will certainly raise positive reactions. These topics are a sure bet” (Stuart). Therefore, the platform’s metrics not only impact people’s desire to raise even more their numbers (see Grosser, 2014), but also define the content, status, image,

sense of belonging, and satisfaction of users, even of those who believe that they do not care about it a lot. The reaction buttons trigger feelings that drive users to accept and reproduce the popular content presented on the platform as the “safe” way for them to raise their metrics and belong to the Instagram “community.”

Instagram is a social media platform for “ordinary” users but also brands, bringing users closer to capital. Although none of the participants has ever used the shopping section, they claimed that they discover new brands and stay updated regarding new commodities and fashion collections. For instance, some interviewees have already purchased something they saw on Instagram. Users continuously encounter products, as the brands’ posts and stories intertwine with the content shared by “ordinary” users (see Carah & Shaul, 2016). Several participants consider Instagram advertisements especially relevant and valuable, normalizing the integration of commercial content into their feed. As Stuart mentioned, “it is part of our life and I can’t find anything negative about it.” Instagram advertisements are acceptable to users, while none has ever tried to avoid them. In addition, Aaron cannot wait for Instagram to become even more commercial. He is an enthusiastic user of Instagram, embracing its popular discourse along with its commerciality. At this point, it should be mentioned that except for his account, he manages his company’s Instagram profile; thus, he may also benefit from that.

I am very optimistic that we are going to shop only through Instagram. I believe that this is ingenious, and this should happen. I am wondering how this has not happened until now. I am angry because it is late. Come on, hurry up. (Aaron)

As far as influencers are concerned (another dimension of Instagram as a marketplace), a number of the interviewees expressed negative feelings about them, commenting on their superficial and “fake” content. Eliza seems to underestimate influencers characterizing them as “nothing” or “trash.” However, at the same time, she follows influencers’ accounts and sometimes participates in “giveaways”¹⁶. Other users mentioned that they would possibly advertise a brand were they to get paid. Users describe the process of making profits on Instagram as effortless and relatively simple, and this promise brings them closer to becoming aspiring influencers. In addition, the users who utilize the platform to promote their services assert that Instagram is an essential tool that no professional worker can avoid. These users described specific strategies that they should follow to effectively advertise their profile, such as sharing positive, mainstream and palatable content. Overall, Instagram has uncritically incorporated commodities into people’s lives by discreetly presenting interesting tailor-made advertisements, while “promising” users that they can be (significant) players in its economy.

¹⁶ On giveaways, products are given free to users, mainly for promotional purposes. Users follow some steps, such as liking a photograph or tagging some Instagram friends, in order to participate in Instagram giveaways and get the chance to be balloted for gifts.

The platform's design urges users to consume content using Instagram instinctively. Being on the platform, they are exposed to a vast amount of positive content. Participants may realize that it may be contrived, but at the same time, they banalize and accept it, conceptualizing Instagram as a platform that just accommodates such content. Through the platform, users want to feel satisfaction and the sense of belonging or to advertise themselves, being driven to reproduce what is called instagrammable popular content.

6.3.2 Implications of the Instagram ideal use and inscribed subjectivities

Based on the interface analysis, aestheticization is crucial and can lead to the standardization of content, the commodification of everyday life and depoliticization of content and users (see Section 4.4). However, a focus on users' beliefs and practices sheds light on the degree to which this materializes and the actual impact of Instagram's ideal use and aesthetics on everyday life.

A first finding is that the aesthetics established by Instagram do bring standardization and homogeneity, limiting users' creativity and promoting mainstream content. As several participants mentioned, they believe that they have to upload specific photographs related to soft topics in order to raise their metrics. Users' creativity and experimentation are restricted as they feel that they cannot upload whatever they want, given that the platform accommodates particular types of content, namely those that bring high metrics and secure approval. Also, several interviewees feel that their profiles should have a uniformity, namely every new post should aesthetically fit the previous ones, as the marketing discourse surrounding Instagram suggests (see Section 4.3.2, p. 56), limiting their innovative or unexpected choices:

The profile should be uniform, one video and then two photographs. I believe that in that way, it looks prettier. (Maya)

Editing is necessary. It ensures uniformity. When one enters your profile, she shouldn't see watermelons and then a black-white photograph. (Maria)

In addition, during the interviews, when participants were shown a user's Instagram post depicting trash, some of them wondered why one would share this photograph while some laughed, stating that this content does not belong to Instagram. These users feel that they can solely produce within the confines of the platform without imagining a different content. Two interviewees involved in art stated that they sometimes prefer to upload more mainstream images and videos so as to ensure approval and likes. For Michael, an amateur photographer, the validation of his work comes mainly from the platform. Thus, in order to satisfy his audience, he uploads simpler, uncontroversial photographs that everyone would understand. Users may be suppressed in the way they express themselves on the platform in order to not

cause discomfort to their followers (Savolainen et al., 2022). Maria is 26 years old, a professional dancer working to earn her livelihood from an early age. Instagram is a vital tool for her profession as it is a means to be advertised and become visible to her field of work. Therefore, she explained that she sometimes uploads more mainstream art content not to jeopardize her likes.

Sometimes, I upload “safer” topics. For instance, uploading a fitness video is more certain to bring likes than a video of a dance improvisation. A photograph captured by a professional photographer is safer than one captured by me.

Hence, following the ideal use of Instagram, individuals are restricted to reproducing more mainstream content, repeating specific topics, and holding back experimentation and creativity. As Savolainen et al. (2022, p. 565) argue, “Instagram’s self-presentation incentives and pressures taught users to treat their profiles as a form of social or aesthetic capital to be protected from expressions that may be seen as unpopular or strange.”

A major criterion for an image to be uploaded is its aesthetics. For many users, in case it is not aesthetically appropriate, it would not be shared on Instagram. Aesthetics seem to be at the core of Instagram production, sometimes depoliticizing content and users. Several users focus on the appearance of what is represented, neglecting the actual meaning of an image. When Andy was shown an image depicting a woman wearing a burqa and holding a placard with quotes against patriarchy, he commented:

This image belongs to the Instagram content because it is well captured. If it were more slipshod, I would say that it does not belong, but her face is very beautiful and the placard very clear. Thus, yes, well done. She did the right thing uploading it.

The user ignored the photograph’s essence, namely that a woman was protesting, and focused on how she appeared. Even content related to social causes that could induce rapture and raise awareness about crucial topics, such as feminism and patriarchy, is neglected and seen through the lens of Instagram aesthetics. In addition, Eliza conceptualized the tendency of people to share more natural photographs of themselves or ones that are not aesthetically “correct” as a trend that cannot last, as these people are not the majority. Also, in this case, the user focused on the aesthetics, ignoring the message that these images convey while doubting that one can bypass the boundaries that Instagram aesthetics set. Aesthetics affect how people perceive the content and how they produce it. Some users claimed that they would not share something related to politics or activism, as it does not fit their gallery of photographs: “it is not something that someone should see all the time. It is my gallery” (Mary), explaining that it consists of her personal moments solely.

Perceiving platforms in specific ways functions as a “cognitive structuring device” with several ramifications (Bucher, 2021, p. 54), as the way people perceive and imagine a platform or algorithms can affect how they use it (Bucher, 2017). Some participants characterized Instagram as a place dedicated to the representation of life, positive content and entertainment, claiming that for this reason it is not a means for users to express their opinions or to get involved with political issues. Eliza said:

I don't use Instagram to convey my opinion, ideas and my ideology. I don't believe that Instagram is the means for that purpose. The platform and the way it is used are lighter. If I wanted to convey a message to others, I would find other ways. Instagram is not for that purpose.

Ale added that “a protest does not need to be covered on Instagram.” Stuart and Aaron believe that uploading content related to current affairs via the platform is inefficient. It is superficial and sometimes just a way to follow a trend. In addition, the content of everyday life that one may upload weakens any other content that relates to crucial topics.

If you upload an image related to Floyd and the following post is a picture at a bar, these two don't add up. You can't write something about Floyd and then upload an image depicting you having drinks. (Stuart)

Some users mentioned that other platforms, such as Facebook, are spaces where people can share their political viewpoints. For instance, Stuart claimed that he uploaded political content through his Facebook profile. How users perceive the platform seems to affect how they receive its content as well as what they produce. However, Aaron and Michael enjoy that Instagram does not contain topics related to politics and it is a platform where they can avoid such topics.

On Instagram, you do not have to take a political position and see people write their bullshit about it. Instagram is a place for photographs and art. (Michael)

I would love social media to become even more as they were at their onset; happy places where we post photographs, liking them and commenting on them and that's it. (Aaron)

Instagram aesthetics also brings everyday life closer to *commodification*, enhancing capitalism and generating desires. First and foremost, many users said that what they see on the platform triggers desires related to consumerism while making them want to follow a luxury lifestyle:

Being for half an hour on Instagram, one receives many inputs and wants to buy stuff. You see someone in a hotel, and you also want to go there. You see someone who has bought a fitness resistance band, and you also want to buy it, even you do not actually want it. (Andy)

I see couples and friends in a pool with a cocktail all the time, and I realize that I start to feel inferior and think if I could ever do this. However, sometimes it motivates me to work more in order to achieve to have something similar. (Maria)

Some users set as their goal a luxurious life that is fulfilled through hard work, embracing the idea “work harder to buy more.” In the case of Maria, who comes from a lower economic class, her inability to possess the represented lifestyle does not cause rupture; on the contrary, it makes her work harder in order to consume commodities. Some participants also said that they visit places and buy services just to upload them on Instagram. Andy embraces this logic mentioning: “you would definitely visit a hotel, if you want to capture something at the swimming pool.” Thus, the representation becomes a goal achieved through consumption and an instagrammable lifestyle offline (see Caldeira et al., 2021). In addition, Kate, whenever she has brunch at an instagrammable restaurant, she uploads a story tagging it. Although she is against consumerism and does not like the commercial part of Instagram, she does not see this action as conducive to that. She mentioned that the way that restaurants design their space or meals to fit Instagram makes her want to upload photographs tagging the business. Industries offer users a way to promote their image, manage their presence, and participate in the platform (see also Leaver et al., 2020) through the location tool, overshadowing their commercial purposes even to users who are against commercialization. As Thatcher (2017) commented regarding the use of the “location tool,” “everyday life is further entangled with processes of capitalist exploitation,” and sometimes users do not understand that or they do not pay attention to it. In the case of Kate, she overlooks the fact that she may advertise a place, as she focuses on representing an instagrammable moment. This also happened with Michael, who is against influencers. However, he mentioned that he might advertise clothes a couple of times if he would be given them for free.

While Caldeira et al. (2021) found that women balance the desire for insta-worthy images and the valorization of authenticity, many participants of the present study seem to neglect the latter, focusing on the representation.

On Sundays, I wake up to cook, and I have to admit that were it not to upload it on Instagram, I would cook something simpler, but I cook it to share it on Instagram. (Michael)

The user adapts his routine to be conducive to how he represents himself on the platform, highlighting the significance of appearance. Other participants have also mentioned that they visit places or do specific things reproducing specific aesthetics in order to upload them on the platform. For instance, Maria said:

I have discussed the idea of going somewhere in order to capture some beautiful images for Instagram with a friend of mine who also likes Instagram [...]. Maybe, you know, you can go to a beautiful place, somewhere with a nice view, to dress up beautifully and capture a couple of lovely photographs.

Everyday life and moments are transformed into means of representation, becoming instruments of the users' online presence. Aesthetics are integrated into people's daily life, while everyday actions and habits revolve around representation. Some users normalize it, while Michael, a big and enthusiastic fan of Instagram, mentioned:

The main reason [people use Instagram] is the promotion. Look, I eat lobster. I eat strawberries. Let's face it; promotion is the most important reason [...] it is not censurable, only facts.

Michael used the words "lobster" and "strawberries" in order to describe the way people expose themselves, possibly embracing an ideal and luxury representation of life that Instagram sometimes promotes (see also Section 5.5.2.3) In addition, it is essential to mention that Michael earns a high income, which allows him to share and participate in such a luxurious lifestyle. Eliza, the user who had deactivated her account at the time of the interview, admits that the possibility of capturing a beautiful photograph was always on her mind: "When I go somewhere, I have in mind that I can upload something. I don't go somewhere just for the post, but you always think, 'I am in a beautiful place. Let's capture a photograph.' That's it." As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, before the interview started, Eliza thought that if she had an Instagram account at that moment, she would have captured and uploaded her beautiful cup of coffee. That moment captured Eliza's attention as it met the aesthetic criteria for a moment to be shared on the platform. Although Eliza had deleted her account, she still thought everyday moments through the lens of the "instagrammable." This incident indicates that Instagram makes specific moments and aesthetics stand out and matter, while the platform has become part of everyday life.

In addition, some participants said that the Instagram content makes them want to change their own appearance. In particular, a participant stated that the images on the platform and filters made her book an appointment with a plastic surgeon for a rhinoplasty:

I think about the filters one can apply to Instagram selfies and how it changes how you see yourself. You apply filters that alter the shape of your eye, lips, nose, and cheekbones, and you start to get used to yourself with the filters, and then you remove all of them and you say, "Oh my god, how do I look?" I should do something. Then, you start thinking that you want the other face. I do consider having a rhinoplasty. OK, I had that thought before Instagram, but entering the platform, I relate beauty with that, a beautiful nose. It is

something that I see all the time on Instagram and I believe that if I didn't encounter it so much, I wouldn't want it to the same degree. I have booked an appointment with a doctor [...]. Instagram affects me.

Furthermore, Kate claimed that when she looks at Instagram photographs, she wants to be more "aesthetic, to take care of herself and looks like the person on the photograph." Users feel that the aesthetics of their photographs as well as their own appearance is crucial for their participation on the platform and that might also be affecting their appearance offline. At the same time, the platform contributes to new beauty conventions or establishes former ones, as people get cosmetic surgeries to look like Instagram edited photographs (see di Donato, 2018), while female users especially can be tempted by the representations of beauty ideals and normative representations of femininities (Caldeira et al. 2021)

6.3.3 The positive aspect of the spectacle: benefitting by Instagram use

Although some participants follow the ideal use of Instagram, and others negotiate the platform's power (see below for a detailed discussion), several users, irrespective of whether they adopt ideal subjectivities or not, benefit from Instagram.

First, users benefit on an individual level. Michael spends a lot of time alone at his home; thus, he finds company in the platform:

A post keeps me company. I will tell you the truth: I work from home all day long and the only way to interact with people except from the work meetings is Instagram.

He often uploads a story just to trigger reactions and have something to do, while at other times, he feels connected with his relatives in Australia and shares their everyday moments. Michael mentioned that he does not upload images on Instagram while having fun, like when he was on a trip to North Korea; however, the platform is crucial for him when he is alone, bored, or has nothing to do. Thus, the ordinary trivial moments may become more meaningful and gain value. He usually shares recipes or meals he prepared, waiting for the reactions. Other users shared that the sense of belonging is significant for them. Diana is very busy, as she devotes much time to her work. The hectic pace of life makes her sometimes write a note to remember to look outside a window during the day. Therefore, she said that instead of communicating with each of her friends, which most of the time is not possible, she shares stories and thereby, she feels that she stays in touch with them, alleviating loneliness. Narrating her story, she highlighted how Instagram helped her to share her feelings:

One time I was very sad because something had happened at work. I had just finished my work, and I was in my car crying, and I uploaded a story. We are so alone, but it doesn't

mean that you have no friends or no one loves you. Nowadays, everyone's life is too busy and complicated and it is the only way to communicate with people you love and tell them that you are not OK and you need their support. It is an alternative way. Instead of calling each one of them, you post it and then they call you when they have time.

It is essential to mention that Diana manages two profiles, a professional one and a personal one. She uploaded the story mentioned above at the latter, which her friends followed. Thus, she has created a profile through which she feels that she stays in touch with the people she wants, while sharing more authentic moments of her life, not fearing the consequences of uploading a story of her crying. Maya also added that Instagram is like a superpower as you can be simultaneously in several places, having a glance into people's everyday lives. Several users, like Diana and sometimes Michael, interact with others through likes or reactions; still, they feel connected. Similarly to Bucher's (2021) claim about Facebook, namely that we should admit that it connects, the same seems to happen with Instagram.

In addition, some users stressed the positive sentiments that they experience through the platform, like boosting their self-esteem and feeling unique. According to Stuart, the positive content can be conducive to his mood, offering relaxation. The platform is also a way for users to recall their unique moments. This use of Instagram has been stressed through other studies as well (see Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Caldeira et al., 2021). In particular, the participants of Caldeira et al.'s (2021) study stressed that Instagram is linked to personal memory, being like a personal archive. Although Instagram may capitalize on this by commodifying users' moments, for them is a way to "tell their story" (Yiota), to "reminisce" (Stuart), and to construct a "legacy" that other generations and descendants will have access to (Michael). For Michael, Instagram is most significant: "I have flirted, fell in love, traveled, stayed in touch, met people and bonded with them, and found others with whom we hadn't met for ages. It has ended up meaning so many things for me." In addition, all his emblematic moments have been uploaded to his profile:

I have had my Instagram account for seven years, and I believe that all my life is there. You can find photographs from my trips, pictures from when I lived in Thessaloniki, Athens, UK, and Cyprus and I worked in different companies. When something is essential, I upload it. My profile is crucial, something like cultural heritage. I usually think that a descendant of mine might enter my profile 30 years later.

Thus, for some users is a way to feel good, express themselves, declare their important moments and tell the story of their lives.

In addition, some users use Instagram as an opportunity to express their creative inclination and work. "I upload something when I have worked a lot for it, and I think that some people

will appreciate it” (Yiota). Aaron said that with Instagram, he could expose his paintings through the platform; before Instagram, this was somewhat difficult. The validation he receives through Instagram motivates him to continue to draw:

It is a motivation for me to keep drawing. Of course, what I like is drawing, not uploading my paintings. However, drawing is something someone does not encounter very often and cannot be easily communicated. I can’t tell you: “come to see what I have drawn.”

Therefore, the likes some images gather, the interaction they trigger, and the fact that there is a place to “exhibit” their art motivate users. Aaron said that it is a way to receive public feedback and, thus, evaluate his work, something that Ale also mentioned regarding her artistic photographs. Michael, the amateur photographer, feels like an artist on Instagram when he receives applause through the likes:

Most artists want to be approved and feel satisfied by that. The actresses stay on stage while the audience applauds. The athletes want something similar. For the photographers, what matters is the positive comments on Instagram.

Thus, users who do not have the space to share their cultural inclination find a way to express themselves and be exposed to others. Other users also said that the platform inspires them through its content; according to a study (see Meier et al., 2020), this can also contribute to their well-being. For instance, Michael mentioned that Instagram was the reason why he started getting involved with photography and traveling, while Mary said that she gets inspired by comix designers and choreographers. Last but not least, according to users, Instagram is a platform that they can use as a tool for their work, being exposed to potential employers or finding employees, such as artists.

6.3.4 Negotiating the Instagram ideal use and inscribed subjectivities

6.3.4.1 *What dissociates users from Instagram*

Although several users accept and follow the norms of the platform and its inscribed subjectivities, at the same time, they negotiate its ideal use. Users’ awareness, feelings, and acknowledgment of the platform’s negative impacts, as well as their willingness to leave the platform are some of the primary triggers that detach users from Instagram.

Users’ awareness regarding the platform’s power is relatively high, recognizing some of its repercussions on them. First and foremost, although users seem to instinctively and, sometimes, passively use it throughout their day, they acknowledge this behaviour, claiming that they usually waste their time. As Eliza mentioned, “it is like a maze. When you enter the platform,

you scroll, wasting your time.” Users also said that Instagram’s design and algorithms play a crucial role in steering them towards passive information consumption. Some interviewees acknowledged that the platform cultivates the need for new content and updates. In addition, they also recognize that its content is only seemingly new, as most of the time it revolves around everyday life, food and pets:

It is always the same. OK, I entered Instagram at 2 p.m., and I saw Anna who went on a trip on mountains, then, I saw Maria who had her nails done and five hours later, I will enter the platform again and I will see new posts but with similar information [...]. So, users have to clean out the profiles they follow to receive useful information (Maria)

Thus, some users are aware of the loop they may be trapped in and continuously consume similar content related to soft topics.

Secondly, some users claimed that being on Instagram can develop into an addiction, with several negative consequences on their spare time and well-being. For these reasons and the feeling that they waste their time, some deactivated their accounts for some time to reactivate them later and initiate a more conscious and healthy use, labelling this process “detox” (Eliza, Andy, Aaron). Aaron described himself as addicted, given that he enters the platform whenever he has spare time. Acknowledging this, he deactivates his account whenever he feels that its use is unhealthy. However, he returns when he feels that he can control its use, but also because of the fear that he may lose something that happens on the platform. On the one hand, the participants tend to rationalize the intensive use of the platform, but on the other hand, they also express their frustration about it. Although they recognize the passive consumption and some of them tried to alter its use, they still report following the same pattern of behavior after their comeback on the platform. Hence, users are torn between their negative feelings about their continuous Instagram use and its habitual use as well as their willingness to be part of it. At the time of the interview, Eliza had deactivated her account for one month, mentioning:

I needed a break, and I thought to experiment with seeing how Instagram affects my everyday life because I believe it affects me negatively. You receive so much information, and the only thing you do is stare at content other users upload, which can affect you, regardless of whether you want to be involved [...]. I realized that I wanted to live others’ lives, and then you cannot live and concentrate on your everyday life and understand what matters to you.

Users’ negative feelings urge users to react and negotiate Instagram use.

Thirdly, many users claimed that every Instagrammer tries to capture and upload their best version generating an “illusion,” a “fake reality” (Maria). They acknowledge that many users

visit places or do things solely to upload them on their accounts and raise their metrics. In addition, users identified several negative ramifications that this representation has, e.g., generates needs related to materialism while urging users to pursue a luxurious lifestyle or alienating users. Mary, a student with low income who does not support big companies, realizes that the platform drives users to consumerism:

For instance, someone may not need a pair of jeans. However, on Instagram, it is represented in a way that you feel is necessary. You need it. It makes you feel that all your problems would disappear if you bought a pair of jeans. So, you will do everything to find and buy this pair of jeans.

However, she also mentioned that her desires might be affected by the travel destinations promoted on Instagram. Two other users feel that Instagram imposes what they should desire without letting them discover what they actually need (Sam, Maria). Michael commented regarding the ideal images presented by influencers:

It is like the Vitam family¹⁷ we used to watch on the television and everyone was happy. But do we believe advertisements? Do you believe that if you bought Vitam, your family would be so happy and get along with each other and they would have their breakfast together?

Michael is not in favor of the commercial part of the platform claiming that he understands its commercial purposes and the mechanism of Instagram advertisements. One of Instagram's core elements as a commercial platform is the capitalist interests that it serves and some users seem to be aware of it. Nonetheless, it should be mentioned that Michael said that he was tempted a couple of times by the free products that could be provided if he advertised clothes via his profile. In addition, some participants, like Eliza and Maria, who actively use Instagram, mentioned that the ideal representation makes them compare their life to it, steering them to pursue what is represented while wondering if their physical appearance and everyday life are good enough. Although users show an acute awareness, there is a contradiction between their attitudes and their actions.

Affect can be the trigger for an opposition. Several participants associated their experience of being on Instagram with negative sentiments. The most common one was stress. Many interviewees mentioned that they feel anxious when uploading a post, waiting for reactions and, specifically, likes. Thus, Instagram users seem to understand that the pursuit of popularity leads to unnecessary stress, as Caldeira et al. also stated (2021, p. 1085). Sam described the platform as a stress point and burden. He does not share his real feelings on the platform, as he

¹⁷ Vitam is a brand of butter advertised in Greece through TV spots presenting an ideal happy family sitting at a table and eating breakfast together enjoying the Vitam butter.

feels that one should always be in a good mood to fit the Instagram content. In addition, given that he also uses the platform for work purposes, it restricts him even more:

It is a stress point. Will I reach the likes I want? Will the people I want like my photograph? Is my picture good enough? Would people approve my post? This process is a stress point, a burden. If I weren't a musician, I might not use it.

In addition, when a post does not gather many likes, some users tend to feel frustrated and doubt the quality of their content. This creates feelings of insecurity and sometimes they end up deleting their posts. As Maria said,

I always think about the reasons why it didn't attract users. Maybe I do not dance well? I have deleted a post because it didn't have engagement.

Diana uses her profile to declare her presence as an artist consultant feeling that it is an essential tool for this; however, she expressed fatigue of pursuing positive reactions all the time. Although Instagram is perceived as a social networking service for fun, interaction and relaxation by most participants, many still revealed that they do not relax when they use the platform. On the contrary, it affects their mental health, as they struggle to prove that their everyday life is the best while also feeling guilty about it and about the time they spend on the application. According to users, comparing others' represented lives results in jealousy, insecurity and feelings of inferiority, especially for users who struggle financially or do not have as much free time as they want. Some participants also expressed that the ideal life generates competition and anger. Overall, users expressed several negative feelings that make them wonder if they should stay on the platform or instead deactivate their accounts. Most users not only had that thought, but also ardently described life without Instagram as perfect, including Andy, who makes profits via the platform: "I would be carefree" (Andy), "It would be the best" (Diana), "I wish it would close" (Aaron). However, none of them has stopped using Instagram yet.

Maria's primary goal is to promote her work as a dancer through the platform. Hence, she recognizes that she should follow marketing tips and strategies and share positive content so as to attract her followers. However, she sometimes feels anger about politics or other current affairs, contemplating whether she should post such topics or not. On the one hand, Maria thinks she can communicate and spread important information to her network via her account, aiming to influence them. Nonetheless, on the other hand, sharing posts about social causes may affect her popularity. Thus, she often struggles between the willingness to share views and information about essential topics and the fear of the possible repercussions on her profile's engagement. In her own words:

What I want to achieve through my profile is to create a positive, pleasant environment that includes art, smiles, dance, fitness. Thus, I should not get involved with negative feelings. If I shared content related to politics, I thought I might lose followers. However, the way I felt, the anger and all those feelings, [at last] prevailed and I thought: “I have to share such content so as to contribute and influence even those 300 people that will see my story.”

Therefore, users may want to use the platform alternatively; however, perceiving Instagram as a space for positive content along with the fear of risking their popularity become a barrier to that.

6.3.4.2 How users' feelings of ambivalence are allayed

Although there is growing awareness about some aspects of Instagram power and users share their negative feelings about the platform, this attitude does not seem to be sufficient in order to generate practices of resistance. On the contrary, several users still follow and embrace many of the platform's norms. Thus, it is significant to look into what appeases users and bring them back to the ideal Instagram use.

Some users feel that they have control over Instagram, neglecting and underestimating its power. Eliza, who had deactivated her account during the interview to eliminate the harmful effects of Instagram, something that indicates the difficulty of controlling the way she used the platform, mentioned, while laughing sarcastically, “Come on, Instagram is not something important.” Users feel they have control over Instagram; nonetheless, what they stated is not attuned to their actions or words, as contradictory discourses are articulated. For instance, while these users do not believe that the platform has power over them, they implicitly express their inability to leave the platform or to ignore its norms e.g. by producing different content than is expected. Andy discontinued Instagram use for a month to “detox,” as he said, and now feels that he has control. However, when he was asked about how he felt not uploading content on it, he stated:

I felt that it was unfair not to upload a story or something when I was having fun. I had this thought, but then it was OK, as I captured some photographs that I knew I would upload as the highlights of the month afterward.

Thus, although some users tried to extricate themselves from the platform's norms, they still followed them without admitting or realizing it. Studying how the disruption of habitual social media use by a detox affects the outline of generational self-construction of young adults, Murumaa-Mengel and Siibak (2019) noted that several of their participants claimed that if they had been disconnected for a more extended period from social media, “they would have a

chance to truly adjust and not find solace in the glimmers of the social media bringe-to-come” (p. 275). In the case of Andy, in all likelihood, it was not the detox time that made his detox period inefficient. Andy seemed to share the solace that the participants of Murumaa-Mengel and Siibak’s (2019) study mentioned, as Andy knew that he would activate his account soon, and for that reason, he captured several photographs in order to upload them in the future. This feeling did not allow him to enjoy the advantages of the detox period (see Murumaa-Mengel & Siibak, 2019). In addition, Stuart, Michael and Eliza firmly stated that users are the ones that are solely responsible about how they utilize the platform, and no one can blame Instagram for anything, as “no one forced you to use the platform” (Michael). Eliza compared Instagram to a spoon so as to highlight that people define the use of a thing: “someone can use a spoon to eat food or to kill someone else,” while Paul said, “it is a piece of cake to understand how the algorithm works.” Many of these users also expressed what is known as the “third-person effect,” i.e., the belief that, in contrast to others, they are knowledgeable enough and have control over their use of the platform: “I can manage some things on Instagram, but other users cannot, so they may have to leave the platform” (Stuart). These users stressed that they know how to handle the information they receive, the algorithms, or even their negative feelings. Stuart is a user who likes to be informed about technology and social media effects so he watches documentaries and reads related articles. Thus, surrounding discourses, like documentaries, and the popularization of terms like “filter bubble,” “personalization” and “algorithms” make some users feel aware of how Instagram works and, thus, sometimes perceive it as not powerful. This raises questions regarding how users can aptly be informed about social media platforms, their consequences as well as their role.

Ale is a new user who entered the platform to share her artistic photographs as a member of a photo group. At the same time, she explored Instagram and its possibilities. During the interview, she claimed that she did not understand why users upload stories and posts depicting their meals or other everyday moments, as she believes it is “silly,” disregarding this content. She also claimed that she would never upload such content. Although she seems to negotiate Instagram’s popular content and norms, some months after the interview, she started sharing stories depicting everyday moments and meals also tagging her friends. In the beginning, Ale was suspicious of Instagram questioning its usage; nonetheless, being on the platform, she started following Instagram’s ideal production. According to her, during the time she first entered the platform, she had just broken up; thus, her friends urged her to sign up on Instagram to declare her presence. We can assume that Instagram has a mechanism to lure users, offering them benefits, such as connectivity and online presence, while the ubiquitous content related to everyday can lead to the normalization of its production.

Although users described the pursuit of likes and popularity as a stress point, they still tried to capture and upload content with a view to becoming popular. It seems that the satisfaction they feel when their photographs gather likes appeases their negative sentiments and any concerns

they may have. Participants mentioned that high metrics bring pleasure, positively affecting their self-esteem and confidence. The key point is gaining traction: when users start seeing others' engagement, they feel content. This is achieved primarily through "safe" (soft and positive) topics. Andy mentioned: "the more perfect an image looks, the more engagement it will have." Even users like Stuart who claimed that he does not care about the metrics of his posts, mentioned that he sometimes shares "safe" topics which will trigger positive reactions. These topics are what Instagram promoted through its algorithms, design and discourses, a positive ambience without triggering any concerns. Therefore, users' disappointment due to (or fear of) low metrics is ironed out by reproducing specific content related to soft topics, bringing them closer to the ideal use of Instagram.

The metrics make users feel like "micro-celebrities." Some participants said they produce content in specific ways to keep their followers interested. Although these users are also "ordinary users" (not influencers or celebrities), they feel that they have an "audience," as they stated, who follows them:

I always think about when I should upload something. Frequency is an important factor in keeping your audience engaged. One of my goals for 2021 is to program my Instagram posts. (Maya)

Suppose a clothing store came and told me that to get this t-shirt as a gift, you have to post it. I would do it one or two times, but my account does not represent this. [...] If I repeatedly advertised stuff, my audience would change. I don't want someone to unfollow me because I tire them with the t-shirts I post. (Michael)

The number of followers makes Maya feel that she can influence many people, while at the same time feels unique. As she mentioned one of her followers told her when they met in person: "I can't believe I am actually talking to you." Content production is influenced by that feeling, as users set restrictions on the images they upload to keep this audience engaged. For instance, Maya noted that if she shares a post conveying negative news, she should upload something positive not to trigger negative feelings. In addition, Michael and Maria avoid uploading more sophisticated content, such as more artistic photographs and dance improvisation accordingly. Michael said: "art does not get likes [...] if I uploaded real art, the majority would say 'what is this', 'why did you upload it?'" So, he shares a more mainstream version of artistic content to satisfy his "audience." Instagram is crucial for Maria's profession, as she is a freelance dancer who struggles to promote herself. Therefore, she does not want to jeopardize her image by experimenting with her content. Thus, users upload positive and mainstream images in order to keep followers' engagement.

Participation in Instagram and the production of content under specific terms are seen as an obligation by some users. Although many users claimed that their lives would be better without being on the platform, they also said they could not leave. Participation in it is considered “mandatory” because “everyone is there”; “if you want to be current and up to date, you have to be on Instagram” (Maya). Eliza said that it is as essential as email, while, nowadays, what is discussed mainly originates from the platform. While being on Instagram, one should also declare their presence:

If you didn't post your breakfast, you do not exist or if you went out and you didn't post it, you are not cool; you don't have life. (Diana).

Thus, being on the platform means that you have to validate your existence by continuously uploading content related to your best everyday moments: “I have to declare that I am also in a good mood and have some fun” (Sam). On social media, personality is so “fragile that it is in constant need of shoring up” (Pasquale, 2015). On Instagram, this also means uploading trivial content to validate one's existence.

Some interviewees, such as Andy, Maria, Sam and Diana, use their profiles also for business purposes. These users mentioned that they should upload more mainstream content related to their services and everyday life so as to create intimacy and attract more followers. They follow marketing strategies regarding the frequency of their posts, editing and content. They see their profile as a product and the exposure of their everyday life as a tool that helps them sell their services:

Entering my profile, you will see dance videos, fitness, dance, and a photograph depicting me on the sea. By uploading something more personal, you bring your audience closer to you, making them want to follow you. (Maria)

Although some users expressed their negative feelings about Instagram, they stay on the platform and produce mainstream content, as it is a necessary tool for their careers. As Gandini (2016b, p. 124) claims “social media has come to represent a working tool that serves the curation of a professional image and the management of social relationships for purposes of professional success and career progression.” Instagram seem to be this working tool for freelancers. Hence, on the one hand, these users capitalize on the platform's affordances promoting their businesses, but, on the other hand, they keep following Instagram norms to achieve this.

6.3.5 User agency and resistance

Many participants use Instagram as is expected by its designers. However, some of them develop resistance to the inscribed subjectivities reappropriating its use.

First and foremost, awareness of how Instagram works and its restrictions is translated into resistance for some users. Some users understand how the system works, they reject it, and at the same time, they still are a part of it. Yiota acknowledges that the representation of life dominates the platform, as there are some “informal rules” that restrict users from uploading their everyday life as it is, reporting that everything should look aesthetically correct on the platform:

Although a photograph may depict friends who laugh and have a good time, they should laugh in a specific way so as to capture an appropriate picture for Instagram. It isn't genuine.

Having recognized all the platform's restrictions, she does not share personal everyday content altogether. She has never shared content related to her life while also keeping her profile anonymous by using a pseudonym. She uploads content, shares her artwork, expresses herself, or makes a statement whenever she wants, completely neglecting the metrics and what other people upload. Although other users did not understand why she uploaded specific content, such as photographs depicting trash, she did not care about it:

I do not know how to say it. I liked this thing very much [to share pictures depicting trash]. Of course, everyone kept saying, “Why do you do this? Why do you upload trash?” I was saying that it is not just trash. Each photograph tells a story.

Yiota has decided to entirely ignore the core of Instagram production, namely the sharing of everyday moments and the idea of constructing an online identity on the platform, and to upload thought-provoking content that does not follow any conventions. Therefore, the content that Yiota shares can be characterized as *anti-instagrammable* content. In contrast to other participants, she rejects the idea that the Instagram profile is an essential part of people's identity that should be carefully curated. She deletes her profiles quite easily, together with their content, and creates new ones: “it is not something important, let's create something new.” The construction of an online identity is essential for social media platforms, as the “ideal users should have a single, stable, consistent and real identity” (Miloni & Papa, 2022, p. 11) that provides advertisers with coherent and comprehensible data (Van Dijck, 2013b). Based on web-surfing habits, platforms, through their algorithms, assign categories of identity to each user, which then can be translated into successfully targeted advertisements and appealing content that can make users stay longer on a platform (Cheney-Lippold, 2011). Therefore, users are usually discouraged from generating more than one profile on social media, as this action is not conducive to a platform's economy (Hearn, 2017). Yiota challenges this informal

“imperative” of platforms, engaging in an “identity play.” In addition, she ardently questioned the use of several Instagram tools and affordances, firmly arguing that she would never use filters, location stamps, hashtags, or marketing strategies, as these make no sense to her. She also feels angry and annoyed when she encounters unauthentic ideal content and this makes her stop the scrolling on the platform. Other users also deconstructed the norms of the platform, saying that they cannot understand why people upload their lives or their meals. However, Maria shares her everyday life for marketing purposes and Paul shares moments of his life but solely through the story tool.

Some users disregard soft topics, everyday moments and ideal lifestyles, characterizing them as “fake” (Paul), “boring”, and “empty” (Eleonor). These users try to control the information they receive “playing” with the platform’s affordances and algorithms. First of all, they mute profiles that usually share this type of content trying to influence their feed.

Some users also avoid posts related to soft topics by skipping them through fast scrolling as well as avoiding the shop section, acknowledging that they generate unnecessary needs. This reminds us of the tactic of users of the Prodigy back in 1990¹⁸. In particular, users noticed that advertisements displayed in a fixed position on their screen, namely the bottom fifth, and tried to avoid them by sticking a piece of paper or plastic over the bottom fifth of their screen (Introna, 2016). In both cases, users’ awareness of the platform’s strategies and intentions enables users to challenge them. Yet, it is significant to remark that when users utilize the *mute* affordance, they act within the confines of Instagram, as they change the default option of showing all the content by accounts’ they follow. As it has been mentioned in the first study of the research (see page 51), the *mute* option can also lead to more data for algorithms and more intense personalization processes while it is uncertain that elimination of soft topics is actually achieved. Still, users retain some degree of control over the content they are exposed to. Michael tries not to support influencers by sometimes unfollowing accounts that constantly advertise products irrelevant to his interests. Maya tries to influence the algorithm by liking specific posts she is interested in to make the algorithm prioritize the information she cares about. She admits that she sometimes “falls into the trap” of clicking on stories from accounts that do not relate to her interests, as, according to her, “stories are the best catch.” However, she makes an effort to alter that:

I have to try harder to influence the Instagram algorithm, control myself and tell it [the algorithm]: “I don’t want you to show me my neighbor, I want you to show me the President of New Zealand.”

¹⁸ Prodigy was a joint venture between IBM, a technology company, and a retail company named Sears. Prodigy enabled the online display of advertisements for the first time on the web (Introna, 2016).

Knowing that she is tempted to click on information related to her friends, Diana has created two accounts, a personal and a professional one. Through her personal account, she interacts with her friends receiving information about their lives. On the professional one, she clicks and likes posts pertaining solely to her profession in order to be suggested related information by the algorithm and use it to her benefit:

I created my Instagram account in order to find works of art, architects, and interior designers. We know that the algorithm knows with what you interact more and, thus, I couldn't find anything new to be inspired or use in my work. Therefore, I created two accounts. Before, the algorithm was suggesting cute puppies all the time, and I wanted to say: "No, I don't want to see puppies. I have to find new artists for my work."

Some users acknowledge how algorithms work "playing" with them to make them work to their own benefit.

Other users resist by exploiting the system for their own purposes. The goal of these users is to disseminate social causes and raise awareness of crucial social topics, like anti-capitalism, feminism, LGTB rights, environment, etc. These participants know how the system works and try to take advantage of it for the common good, exploiting its tools. Firstly, Maya understands that positive content engages individuals while also being promoted by Instagram. Thus, she posts related content so as to catch users' attention and then makes the statement she actually wants to make.

I decided to post a photograph of my dog and then the dog from a shelter. I chose this order because I initially uploaded something positive, my cute dog, that people would notice, and then they would continue to the second picture. Otherwise, they wouldn't engage in the first place.

Diana mentioned that a friend of hers understood that Instagram ranked his story last on his friends' recommendations when he uploaded content related to Israel and Palestine conflict. Therefore, he decided to share sexy pose stories to influence the algorithm and make it prioritize his story, and then he uploaded the content related to the conflict. These users realize that soft topics have a privileged position in the platform and exploit them in order to promote social causes. Also, other users take advantage of marketing techniques and platform's affordances: Maya pays attention to influencers' strategies so as to endorse her content and purposes in the "right" way; Eleonor tries to raise young people's awareness regarding crucial topics, such as capitalism and gender stereotypes, sharing stories as she knows that young users are more likely to engage with them in contrast to posts. Regarding algorithms, Maya knows they favor posts with many likes and, thus, she intentionally likes images related to important issues so as to be promoted by the system. Maria claimed that Instagram is a platform related

to fun and relaxation and this is the way to convey more critical and crucial topics, presenting them accordingly. Thus, using the system and the platform itself that serves capitalist interests, some users try to combat those interests or raise awareness about crucial topics besetting society. Participants' responses confirmed that Instagram is a platform that can be used for social causes. Maya, an active citizen involved in NGOs, claimed that individuals have more power than movements and organizations through platforms like Instagram, adding that it is a powerful tool. She believes that having an Instagram profile is necessary if one wants to impact the world, as users acquire power through the platform. On the one hand, users feel empowered, as they use affordances to promote "good" causes or make an activist's engagement visible, taking advantage of these tools in a way that their creators did not foresee (Gustafsson and Weinryb, 2019). However, on the other hand, as Gehl (2014, p. 123) claimed, "social media, for all their social elements, are oddly individuating phenomena." Therefore, collective actions that formerly required solidarity are now seen as individualistic actions, possibly disempowering collective efforts. Gusstafsoon and Weinryb (2019) also mentioned that people sometimes are active to societal affairs online fleetingly, and this can be dangerous when this way of organizing becomes dominant in democratic societies. However, it is apparent that participants try, through their use, to make an impact through Instagram.

We could argue that oppositional uses emerge, as some users do not care about the representation of their life in the best possible way; they ignore metrics and popularity, exploiting Instagram's affordances. They recognize how reality is commodified and how Instagram generates desires related to consumption and commodities and reject it; instead, they use it to raise awareness regarding social causes and current affairs. In addition, some users negotiate prescribed affordances capitalizing on how the platform works, turning it to their advantage.

6.4 Discussion: towards users' agency

Expanding the three reading positions of Stuart Hall (1973), namely the dominant/hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional position, to interactive media, Shaw (2017) posited three "using positions" (see Figure 26): *the dominant/hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional use*. The first category includes the ideal use of platforms, in which users do what technology requires and use it as the designers want, imagining the affordances in the same way the designers do. On the other hand, the oppositional use contains unexpected uses of technology. In this case, users do not use it "correctly", namely as the designers planned. Users may exploit hidden affordances, imagining different ones than the designers. Lastly, the negotiated using position includes individuals who "use the technology 'correctly' but not necessarily as intended" (Shaw, 2017, p. 598). Shaw's approach stresses that platforms' affordances can be perceived differently by different users without necessarily following designers' intentions, indicating that individuals' interests, practices, and beliefs can change and transform how a platform

works, sometimes shaping it. This model is a starting point to better understand users' actions and behavior with respect to the platform's power and users' resistance, while cases that users perceive and utilize the platform's affordances in their own way are stressed.

Reading Using Positions?			
	Dominant/Hegemonic Use	Negotiated Use	Oppositional Use
Encompasses:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doing what the text/technology requires Using text/technology "correctly" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Possible or emergent uses of texts/technology Using the text/technology "correctly" but not necessarily as intended 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unexpected uses of the text/technology Not using "correctly"
Gaver's (1991) types of affordances:	Perceptible affordances	Perceptible affordances and Hidden affordances	Hidden affordances and potentially false affordances made possible
Nagy and Neff's (2015) Imagined affordances:	Designer and user imagined affordances align	Designers created these possible affordances but did not imagine them as possible for users	Users imagine affordances that designers did not

Figure 26 Shaw's model of Using Positions, reproduced from Shaw (2017, p. 598)

Although platforms enact an ideal use through their structural elements (see Gehl, 2014; Introna 2016), users are not passive. The findings of the interviews indicate that. On the one hand, some users embrace the spectacle and the ideal use of the platform, but on the other hand, other users negotiate and oppose the Instagram norms and its ideal subjectivities.

First and foremost, some users embrace the Instagram spectacle, following the ideal use of the platform with several repercussions on the content they produce, on their feelings, desires and their everyday life. Most users integrate Instagram into their daily lives, receiving an abundance of content that normalizes the representation of life with specific terms. As a technology of government (see Foucault, 1982) that can shape individuals' conduct, the Instagram's affordances, design and metrics urge users to participate in the platform reproducing instagrammable and popular content in order to construct an acceptable online identity, feel satisfaction and experience a sense of belonging. Commenting on a Zuckerberg's statement about public sharing, Bucher (2021, p. 38) writes "this description [Zuckerberg's statement] suggests that public sharing is not something people do naturally, it has to be invented and repeated until it seems like a natural thing to do." Instagram has made soft topics and personal everyday moments a natural thing to share on the platform. Users involved in art prefer to share more mainstream and "safe" content so as to ensure their likes and acceptance. This way, users' content is standardized while their creativity and experimentation are eliminated. In addition, it seems that the crucial role of aesthetics in Instagram production depoliticizes users' content, as they focus on the appearance rather than the meaning of a post. The conceptualization of Instagram as a platform for fun and positive content also restricts them from uploading alternative content or expressing their ideas. Furthermore, users also see the platform as a place

for brands and advertisements, integrating them into their everyday life without questioning. However, participants also benefit from the Instagram spectacle. Some find companionship and connect to each other, sharing their trivial everyday moments. Others see the platform as a way to express themselves, tell a story and reminisce the most important moments of their lives. Some users who exhibit their art on the platform get motivated, as, through Instagram views and likes, they feel satisfied while they find a place to share their artwork.

At the same time, there are indications that individuals negotiate the inscribed use and subjectivities. First of all, they are aware of how the platform affects their lives and feelings. In particular, the negative sentiments they experience become the main reason and trigger that urge them to think about leaving the platform, describing life without Instagram as “perfect.” In addition, they recognize how affordances work, steering them towards an addictive use of Instagram. Users struggle between the habitual and intensive use and the awareness of the repercussions that it causes, together with their negative sentiments. Nevertheless, although there are intensions and indications that users can react to the ideal subjectivities and reappropriate Instagram use, the platform itself appeases their feelings. As Latour (1992, p. 247) claimed “the program of action is in practice the answer to an antiprogram against which the mechanism braces itself.” Instagram foresees the possible objections and frustration of users, inscribing them into its design so as to preserve its goal. Thus, the platform has a mechanism that allays users’ objections and feelings that lead to opposition. Some users perceive Instagram as something insignificant, a superficial platform, while also feeling that they have control over it. Thus, they do not have a reason to oppose the platform. The users’ concerns and negative feelings are sometimes allayed as Instagram rewards their “correct” participation with popularity. In addition, some users feel obliged to participate in the platform, mainly producing content related to their everyday life in order to validate their existence or promote their profession, as Instagram is seen as a necessary tool in the working field, especially for freelancers. However, some users react, reappropriating Instagram use. Some interviewees silently and invisibly use the platform’s affordances differently than expected. Others explicitly use Instagram to fulfill their own goals, expressing their opinions and raising awareness regarding crucial topics while some ignore the ideal use of the platform.

In what follows, I draw on Shaw’s model (2017) of Using Positions as well as Milioni’s (2015) approach regarding user agency to discuss the findings of the study. Users’ beliefs, practices, feelings, and behavior concerning Instagrammers’ inscribed subjectivities, norms, and the platform’s power are organized into four user position categories: *dominant/hegemonic*, *negotiated*, *oppositional* and *subversive use*.

6.5.1 The dialectics of dominant/hegemonic use: embracing the spectacle or valorizing everyday life?

According to Shaw (217, p. 598), a dominant/hegemonic use of the platform “would likely be using an object for its perceptible affordances; here, the designers’ and users’ imagined affordances align.” Several participants use the Instagram affordances as the designers want following the inscribed subjectivities. In this case, the platform is used “correctly” and users share the same subject positions as the designers expected.

In Debord’s spectacle, individuals were marginalized, not being allowed to shape the spectacle, but on Instagram users can participate in its formation through multiple affordances. On the one hand, this possibility can empower users to alter the spectacle itself, but on the other hand, it seems that it can also steer them towards its reproduction. Although users are free to produce whatever they want while also recognizing the contrived life presented, they feel that specific content should be shared. The bombarding of users with content related to soft topics seems to normalize its reproduction. Images instill a worldview conducive to the platform and capitalism in users’ minds. As Debord (1967/2002, p.12) claimed, “the passive acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply.”

However, a high level of awareness regarding how the platform works was noticed. Some users are well informed about the technical aspect of Instagram as well as its impacts on users’ behavior. Yet, they believe that resistance is unnecessary as they have control. Others acknowledge the norms that Instagram generates and how the platform influences their feelings and sometimes drives their behavior. These participants feel that they cannot resist the platforms’ power and, thus, they use the platform following its ideal use. Nonetheless, they still have negative feelings by using Instagram as intended. These sentiments trigger a struggle between users’ compliance and resistance. The fact that several users want to “detox” in order to “feel free” or set their own desires indicates that even the users who adopt Instagram subjectivities do not willingly embrace this use. On the contrary, the will to leave the platform designates that users are not passive but struggle to gain control over Instagram. Nonetheless, they do not resist in the end. Instagram seems to have a mechanism to alleviate these feelings, not letting them be translated into resistance. In particular, complying with the ideal use of the platform, users are “rewarded” with ephemeral positive sentiments, being famous and feeling satisfaction, enjoying the positive aspect of the spectacle. In addition, according to Hunsinger, “what people believe about the internet dramatically influences how they use it” (2019, p. 10). The way users conceptualize and perceive Instagram drives their behavior. Many participants follow Instagram’s discourse, perceiving it as a platform for fun where they cannot produce alternative content, share their real feelings or even deactivate their accounts. At the same time, although Instagram supposedly leaves all these possibilities available without coercing users, it invisibly demarcates users’ actions by maintaining certain truths, which users embrace, combining the material and discursive interventions to afford social power (see Beer, 2017). Users echo Instagram’s popular discourse and the marketing reasoning. They mention that the

platform's content is solely related to everyday life, self-promotion, entertainment and brands. According to them, Instagram is merely for fun and does not include genuine alternative content. The platform's affordances and algorithm recommendations reinforce this conceptualization (see Chapter 4, Chapter 5) and result in supporting particular modes of reasoning. For instance, the users mentioned that they solely encounter content related to soft topics and everyday life in the algorithmically curated Explore page, also confirming and reinforcing the findings of the second study of this research as well as the implications mentioned (see Section 5.7). On the one hand, users follow a dominant/hegemonic use operating inside the dominant code (see Hall, 2019). The way they see the platform is attuned to Instagram's popular discourse and how it describes itself, deeming its norms and values legitimate. On the other hand, affect can be a force to trigger users' actions (Papacharissi as cited in Bucher, 2017), playing an essential role in power relations between users and platforms. Thus, users' sentiments could be a fruitful ground for resistance, as they trigger a struggle between users and the platform.

Referring to digital alienation and using the example of Facebook, Fuchs (2016) claims that feelings of alienation and non-alienation do not necessarily exclude each other. Users can see platforms as advantageous for them but, at the same time, problematic. Although some users follow the dominant use of the platform, reproducing the spectacle, they simultaneously benefit from it, indicating the dialectical character of Instagram. Users express themselves, connect, feel satisfaction and find a place to share their work. Yet, this can also be the way that the very system is maintained, alleviating the users' negative sentiments and concerns.

A good illustration of the platform's dialectical character is how everyday life is shaped through Instagram. On the one hand, it can empower users, bringing trivial moments to the forefront and elevating the everyday. Still, on the other hand, following the dominant use, participants embrace an ideal reality, the spectacle, that generates needs and desires conducive to capitalism. Raoul Vaneigem (1967/2001, p. 67), in his book "The Revolution of Everyday Life," wrote:

Take a thirty-five-year-old man. Each morning he takes his car, drives to the office, pushes papers, has lunch in town, plays pool, pushes more papers, leaves work, has a couple of drinks, goes home, greets his wife, kisses his children, eats his stake in front of the TV, goes to bed, makes love, and falls asleep. Who reduces a man's life to this pathetic sequence of clichés? A journalist? A cop? A market researcher? A socialist-realist author? Not at all. He does it himself, breaking his day down into a series of poses chosen more or less unconsciously from the range of dominant stereotypes.

Instagram imposes a range of dominant pseudoneeds offering users a range of options, shaped by the market, to enrich their daily routine. The participants claimed that they desire to wake

up eating the perfect breakfast or go on holiday to instagrammable places. What they spectate becomes for some what they desire. These needs are generated not only to be fulfilled and experienced but also with the intention to be shared. Thus, everyday life is commercialized and capitalized as it becomes the means for users to participate in the spectacle. An economy is created based on the objectification of the everyday and the pursuit of an instagrammable lifestyle. On the one hand, instagrammable is what exists in the world and fits in the platform. Users always search for opportunities to capture something that is worth shared. Thus, they visit places the platform indicates and share parts of the world suited to Instagram. As Caldeira et al. (2021, p. 1086) claimed, “instagrammable not only shapes what becomes visible and popular within the platform but also molds our overall sense of aesthetics, creating new conventions regarding beauty and what is photographable.” Yet, on the other hand, instagrammable is the moments and experiences that are transformed to fit the platform. Restaurants and museums are formed to follow Instagram’s orders (Leaver et al., 2020), while everyday moments are constructed to be represented on Instagram, ignoring if something is actually lived or not. Everyday experiences are becoming instagrammable in order to find a place on the platform, such as breakfasts on Sunday mornings, as Michael commented. Instagram’s ideal users reconstruct the everyday to fit the Instagram aesthetics, affecting how they experience it. Everyday life has been instrumentalized in reproducing the spectacle and maintaining a system based on the representation and economic exploitation of trivial moments.

In addition, seeing the world through the lens of the spectacle, individuals leave aside what does not belong to it, *depoliticizing* everyday life. Users avoid sharing political content, as it can harm their online image, reproducing a daily life that does not include any concerns and problems. Andy did not notice the woman fighting for her rights in the photograph, but focused on her appearance. It has been stated that through the everyday, individuals can extract knowledge that can cause a rupture between what is actually experienced and what is displayed by powerholders, being a ground for oppression but also opposition (Marcuse, 2010). However, the power that everyday has, namely to trigger the desire for resistance, weakens. Individuals are urged to pursue the fulfillment of illusionary desires and focus on aesthetics, which have the power to seduce, to offer easy pleasure and to mask real suffering (Jay, 1992). The spectacle invites a gaze that focuses on trivial moments in their spectacular version, while what can cause rupture is missing.

On the other hand, the Instagram spectacle elevates everyday moments. Eating, talking, traveling, laughing are ordinary activities shared on the platform. Banal moments, which otherwise may be neglected, are brought into the spotlight, gaining attention and value. Users find a way to compose and share a self-narration of their life. As Ibrahim (2015, p. 50) wrote:

Banal imaging marks the validity of the everyday through images, where images provide a means to authenticate life and to journal one's experiences, both usual and unusual, through the ritual of capture. The posting of experiential images of everyday life taps into the notion of validating experiences through images, where these images function to authenticate the experience in terms of reality construction for self and others.

Users validate their existence while feeling empowered as their everyday moments are valorized. At the Vaneigem's extract (see page 137), the trivial moments of eating a steak in front of the TV or driving to the office could possibly stand out and matter if they were shared on Instagram, inviting the gaze of others.

6.5.2 Negotiated use: the invisible tactics

Regarding negotiated use, individuals use technology "correctly" but not necessarily as intended (Shaw, 2017), stressing the significance of "perceived affordances." In particular, the participants do not precisely follow the ideal use of the platform but develop tacit tactics of resistance. The starting point seems to be awareness of the platforms' power that is translated into negotiating the platform's expected usage. The users perceive Instagram as a place for negotiation, striving to gain control but, at the same, acknowledging the platform's power. First of all, as de Certeau claimed (1984, p. 31), consumers lose their author's rights, deceiving us into believing that they become pure receivers, but we do not know what they actually do or think when, for instance, watching television. Therefore, we should ask them and let them speak. Although users can make their actions visible through Instagram production, this does not mean that several tacit actions do not occur without being seen. Some interviewees ignore several affordances of the platform and Instagram's promoted content and suggestions. In particular, they do not enter Instagram interfaces, such as the Explore page and the shop section, in order to avoid the temptation of wasting their time or falling into the trap of consumption. In this case, users' intentional passivity (inaction) indicates resistance, as they ignore these affordances in order to gain control over the data they consume. Secondly, users' awareness of how the recommendation system works, to some extent, drives them to "play" with the Instagram algorithms (see Cotter, 2019). Knowing the tendency of Instagram to promote more trivial and everyday content, a participant created two profiles in order to separate the recommendations she receives and not jeopardize not receiving suggestions related to her work. According to Deleuze (1992, p. 5), individuals have become "dividuals," namely masses, samples, data, markets or "banks" of information, given that the new language of this society is numerical. Taking this development into account, one's self is transformed into a digital self, constantly divided and subdivided, while for Deleuze, this is a new form of surveillance. However, this participant makes dividuality work for herself. She engages with different content in each profile, trivial posts on the first one and artistic and professional on the second, playing with the different "dividuals," performing and gaining control. Accordingly, Costa

(2018) argued that people from Mardin¹⁹ do not struggle with collapse of contexts on their social media, as they take advantage of privacy settings and create and craft different profiles which lead to different online environments that do not mix up online unrelated social contexts. Therefore, users can find ways to keep different social spheres apart and produce boundaries between different audiences and between private and public, adapting technologies to their lives (Costa, 2018). In addition, the interviewees avoid engaging with soft topics that the system promotes so as to influence the algorithms and limit the related recommendations. Some users also deliberately engage with specific posts, liking and clicking images, in order to receive more inspiring and motivating suggestions or in order to promote alternative topics. In this case, users do not intend to subvert and negatively affect the system but gain control over the algorithmic recommendations while their actions and intentions are not visible. However, some participants sometimes fall into the trap of consuming content related to soft topics. That makes apparent the struggle between users and the platform.

Users find several invisible ways to bypass Instagram's lures and receive the information they want, reappropriating the platform without rejecting the system. That resembles how de Certeau described everyday life practices as forms of resistance using the example of the colonized Indians:

the ambiguity that subverted from within the Spanish colonizers' "success" in imposing their own culture on the indigenous Indians is well known. Submissive, and even consenting to their subjection, the Indians nevertheless often made of the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind; they subverted them not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept (1984, p. xiii).

The participants do not intend to subvert the system; they invisibly act, not necessarily consciously, while the outcome of their practices is not visible to any other but themselves. Users appropriate and utilize the platform that promotes soft topics, an ideal lifestyle and the spectacle. De Certeau referred to the new forms of resistance through consumption, which is "devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xii). Describing the invisible and silent antidiscipline of people's everyday practices, de Certeau introduced the terms "strategy" and "tactics." Strategies are the actions of the powerful, the hegemonic structures; they "are whole structures of regulations like discipline mechanisms" (Yilmaz, 2013). According to de Certeau (1984, p.xix), "a strategy assumes a place that can be

¹⁹ Mardin is a medium sized town in outheast Turkey (Costa, 2018)

circumscribed as *proper* (propre) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, ‘clienteles,’ ‘targets,’ or ‘objects’ of research).” Instagram provides a place to users preorganized and structured through its strategies. On the contrary, *tactics* are the art of the weak (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37). They do not establish their strategies, as they “cannot count on a proper (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other” (1984, p.xix). *Tactics* are practices that distort power strategies and, thus, are practices of resistance coming from daily life practices (Yilmaz, 2013). De Certeau characterized the tactics as what Greek called *metis*, “clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, ‘hunter’s cunning,’ maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike” (1984, p. xix). Thus, based on the findings of this study, we can claim that users negotiate the platform’s power by using invisible tactics reappropriating the platform’s use. They utilize Instagram correctly, but not as intended by the designers. Users’ clever tricks are silent and developed not to subvert the system, but to gain control over it. However, at the same time, some of these users follow some of Instagram’s norms and restrictions, indicating that although they want to reappropriate the platform, Instagram still holds the capacity for discipline. In addition, the practices of users have no consequences on themselves, as they are invisible and neither disturb or affect their presence on the platform, nor affect the system; thus, they can be described as mild resistance practices.

6.5.3 Oppositional use: from exploiting to subverting the system

The oppositional use includes the unexpected uses of the technology. The users do not follow the ideal use of the platform while using it unexpectedly and not as intended. In this case, the resistance is visible; users exploit the system to achieve their personal and collective goals and affect others. The interviewees perceive Instagram as a powerful tool, opposing Instagram’s popular discourse. Some of them also conceptualize it around alienation, consumerism and profits. Instead of seeing the platform just as a way to share their everyday life, they take advantage of it, influencing other users and raising awareness about crucial topics. Hence, they resist depoliticization, as they treat Instagram as a tool for political voice and expression. Negotiated use operates on an individual level, affecting the person who acts, while oppositional practices aim to expose the system and exploit it for the collective good.

In this case, the awareness of how the platform works and the power that users feel they can gain is translated into resistant actions. Users harness Instagram affordances promoting and expressing their voices. When Instagram algorithms ranked a user’s story related to Israel and Palestine conflict last at his followers’ recommendations, he exploited the algorithms’ tendency to favor soft topics in order to feature his post as well as expose the system. The interviewees do not reject the platform; they imagine and invent a different way of usage than the one

promoted. They perceive Instagram as a necessary and powerful tool for social influence exploiting its possibilities. This resembles what de Certeau described as “la perruque:”

La perruque is the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer. It differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen. It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job. La perruque may be as simple a matter as a secretary’s writing a love letter on “company time” or as complex as a cabinetmaker’s “borrowing” a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room (1984, p. 25).

Users appropriate Instagram’s materiality and the time they spend on the platform for their own ends. They oppose the popular discourse seeing the platform as an opportunity to gain power. Users’ practices also resemble *culture jamming techniques* (see Carducci, 2006); they aim to bring into light topics behind the commercial culture by using the very medium they sometimes expose. However, although they take advantage of the system for their own purposes, Instagram still limits their actions as they should be adapted to Instagram’s rules so as to gain visibility. For instance, to promote their content and raise awareness, users follow Instagram strategies while adapting their content in order to gather likes and comments and make their posts visible. As in the case of the negotiated use, some users who opposed Instagram have also been lured consuming soft topic images or being tempted to expose their everyday lives in some instances or to advertise some products via the platform.

Operationalizing user agency, Milioni (2015) suggested that the maximal level of user resistance is *subversion*. At this level of agency, users create structures, such as alternative media and software movements, while being ready to opt out and embrace these alternatives (Milioni, 2015). Although users have not engaged with all these activities in this current study, Yiota seems to subvert the platform by developing resistance stemming from a counter-ideological agency, which, according to Milioni (2015, p. 6), means “the capacity of users to deconstruct naturalized meanings and popular myths about the nature and effects of web 2.0.” Yiota perceives Instagram as an unimportant platform she utilizes for her own purposes, while she questions, rejects and debunk the popular Instagram discourses. She acknowledges the platform’s restrictions on users, questioning and rejecting the Instagram norms while ignoring most Instagram affordances, such as stories, hashtags and filters. The interviewee also denies the core of Instagram production, abstaining from uploading everyday moments or constructing an identity through her profile. She usually uploads content that contradicts Instagram conventions, producing anti-instagrammable content, provoking users’ thoughts. Brunton and Nissenbaum (2011), elaborating on the discussion about data privacy, claimed that companies, such as corporate social media, use in their favor the argument that users can always “opt out” from their services. However, they add that opting out is pretty challenging for users of social networks, given the social and personal costs. However, Yiota enters and leaves the platform whenever she wants while deleting her profiles without any hesitation and creating new ones.

In this case, the user rejects Instagram norms participating in the platform on her own terms and taking advantage of it, expressing herself without fear of the social consequences or the opt-out option. Thus, an anti-spectacular subjectivity emerges; a user who autonomously uses the platform, debunks Instagram discourse, “denormalizes” Instagram norms and benefits from the platform whenever and however she wants.

Taking everything into account, Table 7 presents the four user positions, namely the *dominant use*, *the negotiated use*, *the oppositional use* and *subversive use*, that emerged from the analysis of the third study combined with Shaw’s model (2017) of using position.

Dominant use	Negotiated use	Oppositional Use	Subversive Use
<p>Follow the ideal use <i>Follow the norms and the inscribed subjectivities</i></p> <p>use affordances as intended</p> <p>follow Instagram popular discourse</p> <p>Instagram as a platform for fun and superficial topics</p> <p>Feelings: negative feelings, stress, powerlessness</p> <p>feel in control, underestimate the platform's power</p> <p>positive feelings for the platform</p> <p>no tactics of resistance</p>	<p>Negotiate the ideal use <i>Follow some of the norms, try to gain control and reappropriate the system</i></p> <p>use affordances correctly but not as intended</p> <p>negotiate the popular discourse</p> <p>Instagram as a platform for negotiation</p> <p>Feelings: oppressed feel restricted but aware</p> <p>tacit tactics to gain control of their use <i>e.g. do not enter platform's sections (shop section, explore page), "play" with the algorithm</i></p>	<p>Opposed to the ideal use <i>Reappropriate the system to fulfill their own ends</i></p> <p>use affordances unexpectedly</p> <p>opposed to the popular discourse</p> <p>Instagram as a powerful tool for users</p> <p>Feelings: powerful, in control</p> <p>visible tactics to make an impact, exploit the system for their own ends <i>e.g use sexy pose to promote topics related to Israel and Palestine conflict</i></p>	<p>Not follow the ideal use <i>Autonomous use of the platform</i></p> <p>ignore most of the affordances</p> <p>debunk the popular discourse</p> <p>Instagram as insignificant</p> <p>Feelings: detached feel in control</p> <p>ignore the system's restrictions <i>e.g. delete profiles, upload alternative content</i></p>

Table 7 User positions regarding platform's power

7. Conclusion

7.1 An overview of findings

The overarching objective of this dissertation was to investigate the Instagram platform as an assemblage of heterogeneous human and non-human actors exploring the power relations articulated in it. For that purpose, three studies were conducted focusing on different entities of the Instagram assemblage, namely i. the platform's structural elements, such as affordances and algorithms, ii. discourses and iii. users. The first two studies (see Chapter 4, Chapter 5) investigated the platform's power while simultaneously informing the third study (see Chapter 6), which focused on users' practices. The research's main argument is that new media technologies and platforms that may be neglected or seen as insignificant and trivial, such as Instagram, can construct user subjectivities promoting an ideal use that can affect individuals' everyday life, while users can develop practices of resistance. One of the dissertation's objectives was to indicate how the Instagram platform inscribes user subjectivities and what norms it generates through its design and algorithms. The second objective was to investigate how ordinary users interplay with the platform, how they perceive it and whether they develop practices of resistance.

The first study (see Chapter 4) investigated the Instagram ideal use and inscribed subjectivities, focusing on the platform's interfaces along with the surrounding Instagram discourses. Based on Actor Network Theory and the argument that technology is not neutral but plays a crucial role in the mediation of human relationships, this study introduces four ideal Instagram subjectivities, *1. the passive recipient of content* *2. the producer of spectacular content* *3. the sociable user* and *4. the consumer of commodities and aspiring influencers*, also describing how they function as a norm-(re)producing mechanism. The study has shown that Instagram resembles a contemporary spectacle revolving around the aestheticization of everyday life with various repercussions.

The second study (see Chapter 5) focused on Instagram algorithms as a recommendation system exploring whether a filter bubble emerges. Applying the algorithmic auditing method, I have shown that Instagram algorithms render certain topics much more salient, generating a filter bubble of commercial and soft topics that closely resembles what Guy Debord introduced as the spectacle. For instance, regardless of users' preferences for alternative topics, algorithms promote specific content determining what is popular and visible on the platform. The Instagram recommendation system seems to privilege specific topics, as Quick (2021) has also shown, focusing on the gay Instagram. The results of his study indicate that algorithms favor the visibility of the white, Western and wealthy gay person. Thus, Instagram recommendations render it challenging for users to encounter diverse content. In the current research, a good illustration of that is Audit 3 and the words "*woman*" and "*body*" which were used in order to

search content on Instagram (see page 96). The keywords led to recommendations that were closely related to mainstream and commercial content for User A, disregarding alternative topics, while User B also received such recommendations. The images that users encounter the most on the platform, namely popular content, can shape what users feel comfortable sharing (Caldeira et al., 2021), determining what they consume and, at the same time, what they produce. Although some researchers disregard the filter bubble phenomenon and the implications of personalization algorithms (see Burns, 2019; Dutton et al., 2017), the results of the second study indicate that Instagram algorithms mostly promote an ideal reality that consists of brands, neglecting social issues. Therefore, questions are raised regarding the impact of that content on users as well as regarding which accounts can reach a broader audience, such as in the case of the gay Instagram (see Quick, 2021).

The first two studies investigated how power is articulated on Instagram, exploring the mechanisms the platform employs to urge users to embrace its ideal subjectivities and norms. Based on these results, the third study investigated, through in-depth interviews, how “ordinary” users react to these mechanisms. The results have shown that individuals adopt different use positions, *following*, *negotiating*, *opposing* and *subverting* the system. Up to now, several studies have focused on the exploration of user agency on Instagram, mainly investigating specific groups of users and phenomena, such as influencers, women self-representation, and selfies. Caldeira et al. (2021) stress that “ordinary” users should also be investigated, as sometimes their practices, for instance self-representation practices, are dismissed as trivial. The studies so far indicate the complex relationship between users and the Instagram platform, which is also the focus of the current research. Indeed, Instagram offers individuals benefits. Many users experience positive emotions using the platform while claiming to enjoy several advantages. For instance, according to the interviews, Instagram use alleviates loneliness, users experience a sense of belonging, they find new information and have a place to display and promote their art and work. Abidin (2016b), Cotter (2019), Tiindeberg (2015) and Griffin (2022) give prominence to user perspectives and the ways they use Instagram to their own benefit. Individuals sometimes use the platform for profit (Abidin, 2016b; Cotter, 2019), to feel a positive validation (Tiindeberg, 2018), to encounter new information and display solidarity (Griffin, 2022). Caldeira et al. (2021) also stress that young women feel in control and comfortable with their self-representation, keep in touch with other users and some perceive the platform as a personal diary through which they preserve their memories. Thus, there is not much doubt that Instagram users do have advantages by participating in the platform, as the current research also indicates.

However, several problematic areas stem from Instagram use as well. In order to enjoy some of the platform’s benefits, users are urged to follow self-branding technics, carefully curate their representation and adopt strategies to raise their metrics reproducing “Insta-worthy” content (Caldeira et al., 2021; Tiindenber, 2018). Some users also see Instagram as a “high-

pressure platform,” where they are compelled to share an ideal version of their lives (Caldeira et al., 2021). Several of these implications of Instagram use are also evident in the current research, along with other aspects that highlight the complexity of the heterogeneous relations between users and technology. On the one hand, individuals gain from their participation on the platform. On the other hand, benefits, such as connectivity and profits, are the Instagram’s rewards and lures for the “correct” and intended use. The benefits people enjoy are not underestimated, but they can also be seen as the platform’s leverages that steer individuals towards an ideal use, which eventually is a powerful profit-making mechanism for Instagram.

I have indicated that some users do not unquestioningly follow the inscribed subjectivities and platform’s intended use but express their concerns and opposition. Skrubbeltrang et al. (2017) have also demonstrated that there are users who opposed the introduction of personalization algorithms on Instagram, expressing an array of concerns, including worries about commercialization, prevalence of mainstream content and violation of user autonomy. In the current study, some users who were bothered by Instagram strategies and expressed their dislike about how the platform works, were reluctant to oppose the platform in practice. In Caldeira et al. (2021) study, although interviewees reveal that users sometimes feel and recognize the unnecessary stress that Instagram generates due to the pursuit of popularity, they keep looking for popularity, sharing images that follow specific conventions. Nonetheless, in the current study, some users develop *tacit tactics* in order to (re)gain control of their use, such as ignoring interfaces and content or creating secondary profiles. Other users are not afraid to oppose Instagram, neglecting its ideal use. O’Meara (2019) has also indicated that users develop practices of resistance. In particular, some influencers try to “hack” the Instagram algorithm as an answer to the “threat of invisibility” and Instagram labor by using the “engagement pods,” namely communities that mutually engage with each other’s posts. In addition, more and more users generate accounts devoted to alternative purposes ignoring the idealized version of the self that the platform urges them to expose (Mahoney et al., 2016; Crowder, 2021; Savolainen et al., 2022).

Thus far, the studies focusing on Instagram demonstrate the complex relations between the platform and its users. Seeing the platform as a whole, the current research indicates the nuances of users’ agency; the concessions, negotiations, invisible and visible practices, emotions, beliefs and ways of resistance. In addition, it reveals the complex mechanisms that delineate the platform, indicating what makes users follow, resist and negotiate Instagram’s ideal use and subjectivities and which are the power strategies that alleviate users’ intentions and feelings of opposition.

In this concluding chapter, de Certeau’s approach regarding *place* and *space* is utilized to analyze the entire ecosystem of the platform revealing the strategies that construct the Instagram *place*, and the tactics that transform it into a *space*. It concludes with a discussion

about which is the ultimate level of resistance, bringing into attention the notions of *voyeur* and *walker* while introducing the notion of *transient*.

7.2 Instagram as a digital city

Elaborating on the notions of strategy and tactics, de Certeau referred to *place* and *space*, distinguishing them. Strategies assume a “place that can be circumscribed as proper (propre).” The *place* is the base where strategies are employed, while through them *place* is constructed and distinguished. Power relations are rendered possible when a subject of power can be isolated, delimiting its own place, which “serves as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats can be managed” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 36). Spatiality is one essential element that distinguishes strategies from tactics. Tactics do not have a proper, as “the place of a tactic belongs to the other” (de Certeau, 1984, p. xix). De Certeau defines a place (*lieu*) as:

the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (place). The law of the “proper” rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are beside one another, each situated in its own “proper” and distinct location, a location it defines (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117).

Therefore, a place is stable and is constructed by strategies. On the other hand, place can be transformed into space through tactics, as *space is a practiced place* (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117). De Certeau used cities as an example for places constructed by strategies. A city can be seen as a place demarcated by buildings and streets that provide a “instantaneous configuration of positions” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117). Accordingly, we can see Instagram as a digital city²⁰, a stable place, that is constructed by design choices and structural elements, designed for a given function, an ideal use (see Gehl, 2014). The first two studies of this dissertation provide an insight into how the Instagram place, otherwise the digital city, is constructed, invoking users to move inside its confines and become the ideal users of it. Their findings demonstrate the strategies of the platform that shape its place. However, at the same time, a city and a street can be transformed into a space by its walkers and their practices (de Certeau, 1984) (a point that will be elaborated on below). The third study indicates how users follow the place’s orders and indications, but also, how they reappropriate the platform, how they perceive its affordances differently than the designers expected, and ultimately, which are the tactics that transform a place into space. The digital city is a concept that stresses the complexity of digital platforms, highlighting their power but also the agency of “ordinary” people. In addition, it

²⁰ Spatial metaphors have been used by the early phases of web development. For instance, the metaphor, “superhighway of information” by Bill Clinton or even cyberspace (for more spatial metaphors see also Matlock et al., 2014).

stresses the “fluidity” of a “proper” as it can remain stable and concrete, imposing its orders to its inhabitants, or become a space for users. At the same time, the possibility of becoming an organized place again always lurks. Thus, this fluidity and spatial metaphor indicates the inner, continuous, and endless struggles that take place in the digital media “probers,” describing power relations. As de Certeau claimed, a “space is a practiced place” (1984, p. 117), and this phrase points out that the possibility of resistance always exists.

7.2.1 Instagram as a place

Instagram can be seen as a stable place formed by strategies. According to de Certeau, each place is constructed and described by i. its *materiality* and architecture that sets *limits and possibilities*, ii. knowledge – or, in this context, a *cognitive structuring mechanism* iii. a triumph of *place over time*, iv. a disciplinary control established by a *continuous monitoring* hidden from users, while this dissertation also adds v. the role of *affect*.

Firstly, each place sets *limits* demarketing and organizing *possibilities* and *interdictions* for each individual, as a spatial order does (de Certeau, 1984, p. 98). For instance, a wall can prevent one from moving further (de Certeau, 1984). De Certeau presents urban planning as a strategy to establish a concrete and stable form dominating and controlling a place. Accordingly, Instagram’s structural elements, namely affordances and algorithms, can be seen as the elements that organize the Instagram “proper” and, by extent, users’ actions, opening up possibilities and setting restrictions for them, constructing a “digital city” ready to host and at the same time control users’ activities. Platforms can be seen as “ghostly-frames,” namely frameworks empty of (user-generated) content, ready to be inhabited (Gehl, 2014, p. 6). Still, at the same time, they are constructed by rigid structures where only certain things can happen. The platform does not belong to users and, thus, it can be altered whenever the company desires. Its users just get informed about the changes and updates without usually being able to intervene. Instagram allows individuals to utilize its place, generate content, connect with other users as, for instance, a square enables people to gather. The Instagram “proper” is designed in such a way as to urge users to move solely inside its confines. For instance, although the platform does not compel users to generate positive everyday content, the existence of funny filters and happy emojis urge them to share entertaining posts.

Secondly, strategies operate through a *dominant discourse*. In strategies a specific type of knowledge is recognized, “one sustained and determined by the power to provide oneself with one’s own place” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 36). De Certeau sees power as a precondition of knowledge that “it produces itself in and through this knowledge” (1984, p. 36). In the case of Instagram, the company itself communicates a specific image of the platform, a dominant discourse promoted through its site, while marketing agencies apparently follow and reproduce this discourse (see Section 4.3, Section 4.4). Thus, Instagram platform via surrounding

discourses generate knowledge producing and maintaining certain truths through which its place is defined. As de Certeau (1984, p. 38) argued, “strategies are actions which, thanks to the establishment of a place of power (the property of a proper), elaborate theoretical places (systems and totalizing discourses) capable of articulating an ensemble of physical places in which forces are distributed.” The knowledge surrounding each platform and how they are conceptualized affects how users perceive them. The findings of the interface analysis, along with the analysis of discourses, indicate that Instagram is conceptualized as a platform for fun where users can share their trivial everyday moments and interact with others and brands, determining its *dominant cognitive structuring mechanism* (see Bucher, 2021), namely the way the platform intends to be perceived. This conceptualization and knowledge urges users to perceive the platform in a specific way, legitimating its place. For instance, by seeing Instagram as a platform devoted solely to entertainment and self-promotion, several users accept and embrace self-branding techniques and the representation of everyday life on Instagram as the only way for one to use the platform.

Thirdly, de Certeau (1984, p. 36) claimed that:

a “proper” is a *triumph of place over time*. It allows one to capitalize acquired advantages, to prepare future expansions, and thus to give oneself a certain independence with respect to the variability of circumstances. It is a mastery of time through the foundation of an autonomous place.

What de Certeau claimed is that a “proper” controls and erodes time, by providing a stable place that offers specific advantages. The exploitation of time can bring changes and variability, but time spent in the place is well anticipated providing a planned future without any surprises. The Instagram “proper” is an autonomous place where users are not affected by any variability, given that they are in a stable and well-organized locus. The ideal users do not fear that something will change in that proper, as by following the system’s instructions and norms, they can plan their future in the platform without dealing with anything unexpected. For instance, by following the platform’s instructions and producing content that follows specific conventions, users can raise the number of their likes. Following the ideal use of the platform, users capitalize on predetermined advantages, such as connectivity, the pleasure and entertainment of soft topics and the aestheticization of their everyday life and, at the same time, they become the ideal users of the platform whose time is predetermined and anticipated in a way that is conducive to the platform’s aims and logics.

In addition, Instagram organizes and determines users’ time imposing a specific pace of use. Instagrammers should follow that pace in order not to miss content, stay up to date, keep up with other users and be visible. An indicative illustration of how the platform imposes a rhythm of use is the way the story tool works. Users who want to see their followees’ stories should

follow the Instagram pace and continuously check the app before the stories disappear, as a participant mentioned. Stories are strongly related to time. Furthermore, notifications of new posts and stories appear on users' mobile phones all the time, reminding them to check their profiles. In addition, Instagram steers users to follow its pace of production. Several users mentioned that they upload content at a specific frequency and at specific times of each day so as to keep their audience engaged and influence the algorithm. The importance of time and frequency of posting as well as the necessity for one to be adapted to the changes of Instagram's algorithms have also been stressed in Caldeira's et al. (2021) study of ordinary young women on Instagram. As one of their participants mentioned, in order for users to ensure traffic to their posts, their strategies "need to be constantly adapted to keep pace with changes in Instagram's algorithm" (Caldeira et al., 2021, p. 1085). "The 'proper' is a victory of space over time" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xix, emphasis in the original). Users' time is standardized and controlled through strategies which try to erode time through the establishment of a place. Instagram claims people's leisure time, a fact that was recognized by interviewees.

Last but not least, de Certeau claimed that a "proper" is also "a mastery of places through sight" (1984, p. xix), making possible a *panoptic practice*, a disciplinary control over users that is hidden from them. Like in Bentham's prison, the panopticon represents the system, powerholders who impose their power and control without making their presence apparent. As Foucault (1977/1991, p. 221) explained:

the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers.

Instagram exerts a disciplinary control over users through its hidden ubiquity and continuous monitoring. On social media, like Instagram, users are constantly monitored not only by the platforms' system and algorithms but also by other users. On the one hand, platforms use their algorithms to know their users better and predict what they want to encounter, creating "impressionable subjects" (Introna, 2016). On the other hand, individuals are also motioned by other users. The platform makes the sight of others visible through metrics, such as the number of likes and comments. This panoptic practice is a way to control and limit users' actions through sight. Although some users indicate some signs of negotiation of the platform's power, Instagram seems to have developed a mechanism to restore the order, and the panoptic practice appears to be at the center of it. The platform suppresses the contradictions that may occur by declaring its presence and power through the omnipresent gaze of others. Behind the panoptic

practice lies the system which legitimates a proper behavior, the ideal use. Bucher (2012, p. 1171) has argued that in Facebook

There is not so much a ‘threat of visibility’ as there is a ‘threat of invisibility’ that seems to govern the actions of its subjects. The problem is not the possibility of constantly being observed, but the possibility of constantly disappearing, of not being considered important enough. In order to appear, to become visible, one needs to follow a certain platform logic embedded in the architecture of Facebook.

Likewise, on Instagram, users do want to become visible, and thus, they try to follow specific actions. However, the others’ gaze and the threat of visibility also determine a proper behavior, as, according to the interviewees, users do not want to be seen to deviate from what is expected to be seen. The participants claimed that they do not upload specific content, such as photographs related to politics or art, bearing in mind that other users may not like or approve it. When individuals feel that they may be observed by others, they “identify with the outside observer’s viewpoint, and add that alongside their own viewpoint on your action,” as “the targets of the panopticon know and feel the eye of the guard on them, making their actions different than if they were done in private” (Reiman, 1995, p. 28). Thus, the content that users share and their participation on the platform is determined, to an extent, by the feeling that they may be observed. Caldeira et al. (2021) found that although women on Instagram feel comfortable and in control about sharing photographs of themselves online, their practices are also strategic so as to produce ‘Insta-worthy’ images that are interesting or beautiful. The gaze of others intensifies a process of curation regarding self-representation on Instagram. The panopticon gaze relies on how much users fear the system and its consequences when they deviate from an “acceptable” behavior and content.

What Michel de Certeau left aside in analyzing power, human agency and place, is the role of people’s *affect* and the way a place triggers specific sentiments. This absence has also been noted by Cameron Duff (2010). Duff conducted an ethnographic analysis of young people, attempting to clarify the role of feelings in the production of place, focusing on the city of Vancouver. She stressed that being in a place involves several affective relays as people try to cultivate private places, negotiating the designated places, and thereby they transform them into “thick places.” Based on Edward Casey, Duff (2010) sees thick places as places that present opportunities for personal enrichment and “enhance one’s sense of meaning and belonging, forging a series of affective and experiential connections in place” (p. 882). Thus, she stresses the positive role of sentiments in the production of places, as they can transform a designated place into one of personal enrichment. Expanding on that, Ash (2013) focuses on non-human elements and, especially on the iPhone 4 case, argues that “technical objects are not lifeless mechanisms but actively produce spatio-temporal atmospheres, which shape the humans who are immersed in these atmospheres” (p. 20).

In the case of Instagram, several participants of the current research implicitly and explicitly express an array of emotions stemming from Instagram use. The interface analysis, together with the audit studies, reveal that the Instagram place has been constructed in a way that, firstly, aims to reward users' compliance with *positive emotions* and, secondly, urges users toward a positive and promising reality demanding users' expression of positive feelings. As a commercial platform, Instagram aims to trigger those sentiments in order to keep its users on the platform and raise its profits. Individuals' feelings are most significant for marketing agencies and social media companies who develop mining techniques for marketing purposes and experiment on how they can influence them (see Kramer et al., 2014). Thus, walking the Instagram place as planned, for instance, producing specific content, users are awarded with popularity, visibility, and other benefits, feeling content, satisfied and sometimes unique, according to the interviewees. The place and its materiality produce a positive atmosphere that users can be part of, if they participate in the intended way. Some users who follow the place's rules benefit and experience positive sentiments that matter to them, raising their self-esteem and confidence and relieving loneliness. In fact, active Instagram users can experience positive affect (Hanley et al., 2019), and feel valued and seen (Tiidenberg, 2018). Although these feelings may be genuine, for some users are also temporal, as some interviewees claimed. Users should produce more and more content without deviating from the intended behaviour so as to experience the positive sentiments again. Some users also feel stress participating in the platform, an experience that drives them to follow the platform's conventions (see also Caldeira, 2021) so as to alleviate that feeling. However, for some users the platform can be seen as a place of personal enrichment (see Duff, 2010), as users experience positive sentiments, express themselves, expose their work to friends and build relations. In addition, it should be mentioned that some users develop sentiments that can also drive them to oppose the platform and alter the place. For instance, emotions such as annoyance about the algorithmic recommendations or anger about the endless scroll towards which users may be tempted is a starting point for them so as to alter their behavior on the platform. Emotions seem to play a significant role on how users move in the place. On the one hand, places seem to control and trigger specific sentiments that can be conducive to the platform's economy. However, on the other hand, affect can be a force that also urges users to act.

7.2.2 Instagram as a space: "walking" the platform

On the other hand, a space

is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities. (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117)

A space is neither stable nor owns a visible recognizable “proper.” A place is transformed into a space by the tactics that utilize the place of the other. That is why de Certeau claimed that “space is a practiced place” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117). Considering the illustration of a city, “a street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117). Individuals can reappropriate a place’s use, “it [tactic] must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37).

7.2.2.1 A clever utilization of time

As has already been mentioned, tactics are based on a clever utilization of time (de Certeau, 1984). According to de Certeau, in order for a place to be transformed into a space,

It [tactic] must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into “opportunities.” The weak must continually turn their own ends forces alien to them. This is achieved in the propitious moments when they are able to combine heterogeneous elements. (1984, p. xxi)

Individuals can capitalize on time, resisting the stability and organization of a place. They can avoid using the place according to its laws, and bring to it their experiences and memories through their acts. As in the case of the secretary who writes a love letter on “company time” (see de Certeau, 1984, p. 25), accordingly, users leverage their time on the platform differently from what is intended, or the designers foresaw, for their own ends. The users who follow a negotiated use of the platform invisibly resist through the appropriation of time. They use the platform, but they avoid certain acts in order to resist the platform’s power and its effects, abandoning them. For instance, some users do not use the shop section or the Explore page and just scroll through posts related to soft topics without noticing them in order to avoid them. These places become inactive, as these users do not “walk” them, while invisibly “changing” the spatiality of the place, transforming it into space. From the early web, users and platforms have an implicit “deal;” users do not literally pay a fee to use several social media platforms, but they “pay” with their time spent on them, providing their data and becoming impressionable subjects who engage with advertisements, brands, and services (see Introna, 2016). Like in the case of Prodigy and its users who tried to avoid advertisements by sticking papers on it and “breaking that deal” without being noticed (see Introna, 2016), Instagram users scroll faster and skip over when they encounter commercial and mainstream content trying to spend their time alternatively. The platform tries to impose a pace of use, making users continuously consume posts and stories related to soft topics and, through them, advertisements. Still, users find ways to set their own pace, managing their time differently without being seen.

The users play with the materiality of the platform and, specifically its algorithms, manipulating them to affect their outcomes. Users make selections and set prohibitions to themselves, as de Certeau claimed that an individual might forbid her/himself from taking a path that is considered accessible or obligatory. Likewise, users try not to encounter commercial topics by manipulating the algorithms, namely liking alternative posts on purpose (see Section 6.3.5, p. 132 for more details), or avoiding entering certain places, as has already been mentioned. Knowing that some profiles tend to share trivial moments of their everyday lives, a user mutes these accounts so as to avoid encountering that type of content. Users are expected to spend their time mindlessly scrolling on their feed, as, based on the results of the first study, Instagram invites a fleeting kind of looking, one that is not careful or contemplative (see also Griffin, 2022). However, considering Griffin's study (2022), even though sometimes users just glance at images and their accompanying text, this process may be unexpectedly meaningful. Users can be exposed to ideas that they might not otherwise encounter (Griffin, 2022), exploring information besides the popular superficial topics that one may expect to consume, such as the case of the AIDS memorial, engaging in the process of witnessing the pain and suffering of others (Griffin, 2022). Thus, although these users may glance at images related to the AIDS memorial, this process may foster sympathy, while users may feel closer to that illness (Cifor, 2021; Griffin, 2022). However, we do not know how easy (or difficult) it is for users to encounter this type of content, as it seems that Instagram algorithms promote popular content related to mainstream topics and everyday life, based on the second study of the current research. In addition, in the case of the current study, although some users tend to glance at influencers' photographs, they are not affected by the marketing strategies and do not desire to purchase the promoted products. On the contrary, they scrutinize the images and find ways to promote the content and topics they care about, such as environmental issues, and catch other users' attention. These users "correctly" utilize the proper and its architecture, such as affordances and algorithms, but not as intended. Thus, like in the example of the indigenous Indians (see page 140), users do not reject or visibly alter the system, but they use it differently from what "their conquerors had in mind" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xiii). Users do not alter the place, but their agency is based on a different utilization of time and the procedure of "consumption" (see de Certeau, 1984, p. xiii). Although they follow some of the norms and laws of the "proper", they invisibly try to seize opportunities to control their use and disempower disciplinary mechanisms or even take advantage of the place for their own purpose sometimes even unconsciously, like in the case of AIDS memorial. Thus, the place is reorganized, as spatial elements are neutralized; they "condemn certain places to inertia or disappearance" (de Certeau, 1984, p.99).

Tactics are "determined by the absence of power" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 38); people do not own a place, nor can they make structural transformations on it. Instagram users cannot change the platform, their terms, materiality, and architecture. Nonetheless, on social media like Instagram, the place itself is empty until users populate it with their content. Thus, to an extent,

they participate in its formation. Users who pursue an oppositional use of the platform reappropriate the system to fulfil their own ends and turn it into an “opportunity” (see de Certeau, 1984). Knowing that through the platform they can influence other people by exposing their beliefs, they try to make their actions visible in order to interfere in the formation of the place and alter its purpose, for instance by producing different content from what is expected, such as political and activist content. A place offers predetermined and fixed possibilities, opportunities, and advantages, such as, in the case of Instagram, sharing everyday content, the option of “upgrading” it through filters or the enjoyment of self-exposure. But users can invent new possibilities and transform each “spatial signifier into something else” by moving in the place (de Certeau, 1984, p. 98). By posting content related to activism or political topics, users deviate from the ideal use of the constructed order, utilizing their time differently. They make their actions and the new possibilities discernible to others embedding them to the place. Some of them go beyond the limits of the objects and the restrictions they set on them (see de Certeau, 1984), such as in the case of the Israel and Palestine conflict. Although Instagram renders posts related to that conflict almost invisible or illegitimate up to the point of deleting them (see Osman, 2021), users find ways to bypass Instagram’s rules by utilizing its tools and exploiting popular topics so as to influence the algorithm and express their concerns about Palestine (see more details on page 127). Strategies construct a stable autonomous “proper” with specific advantages and no surprises, but through the users’ tactics, time triumphs, as users use it unexpectedly by composing “spatial ‘turns of phrase’ that are ‘rare,’ ‘accidental’ or illegitimate,” leading into a rhetoric of walking (de Certeau, 1984, p. 99).

7.2.2.2 *Users’ imaginaries and tactics*

The *dominant cognitive structuring mechanism* is related to how the platform itself wants to be perceived by its users based on the facts and knowledge it produces about itself (see Bucher, 2021). It seems that how users see the platform and what they imagine about it and its affordances also influence its use (see Bucher, 2017). The knowledge produced about the platform is a strategy that constructs the Instagram place; for instance, the users who follow the dominant use of it embrace the popular discourse of Instagram and do not see any other possibilities in it.

Although perceiving the platform not as intended is not a tactic for individuals to oppose the system, it can be seen as a starting point for them to reappropriate the place. Some users start to debunk the cognitive structuring mechanism of the platform and negotiate how the platform is conceptualized, producing their own imaginaries. These users see beyond the veil of knowledge that covers the place, starting to negotiate the ideal platform’s use. They are aware of how it works, recognizing parts of its disciplinary mechanism that constructs the Instagram proper, such as the invisible pressure to post photographs depicting an ideal lifestyle, the pursuit of popularity and the curation of images in terms of acceptability. These users perceive

the platform as a place that restricts their actions. Still, at the same time, they do not feel confident that they can resist its power – for instance, they claim that they should upload the intended content, as participating on the platform without producing it is not an option. These feelings seem to stem from the panoptic practices of Instagram, which act as a barrier to their actions, restricting and shaping their participation. However, they develop *tacit tactics* of resistance; for instance, they ignore the popular content that may negatively influence them or create secondary profiles in order to control the content produced as well as their flow of information.

The users who follow an oppositional use do not perceive Instagram solely as a platform for fun, ignoring the popular discourse. They recognize its restrictions but perceive it as a powerful tool whereby they can raise their voices and have an impact. They do not fear the system and the panoptic gaze of the others; this results in visible tactics that aim to alter the place and create opportunities, such as sharing alternative content via the platform in order to positively influence other users and express their beliefs. These users blend with the place, but they negotiate and oppose the platform's ideal use transforming it into a space.

However, although some users reappropriate – to an extent – the place, using it for their own purposes, the well-organized place puts some barriers on them and their intention to resist. Firstly, users should follow the places' rules for users' actions to become visible. This can affect the outcome of their actions, while sometimes their content may be condemned to invisibility by the algorithms. Secondly, walking the Instagram “proper,” users are sometimes lured by the advantages and joys they encounter during their walk (see Section 6.3.4.2 for more details). Therefore, although users may try altering the Instagram place, making their actions visible, deviating from the ideal use and having an impact, their aims may not be fulfilled, as the place's strategies render it challenging. For instance, some users who are against the exposure of personal moments and the commodification of their lives have been tempted by the popularity the platform offers, sharing personal moments and selfies or thinking of promoting brands in exchange for complimentary products.

7.2.2.3 *The subversive user: a transient of a place*

According to De Certeau (1984), one can experience a city from two different positions, seeing it from above and walking in it. De Certeau differentiated these positions and characterized the individuals who observe the city from above as *voyeurs* and those who walk it as *walkers*. Referring to the first position, he described the experience of one positioned at the summit of the World Trade Center in New York:

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an

anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic. When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators. An Icarus flying above these waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. His elevation transfigures him into a *voyeur*. It puts him at a distance. (de Certeau, 1984, p. 92)

Voyeurs observe the city from a distance, not being affected by the bustling streets and the nervous traffic. This distance allows them to see and read the city as a whole, to feel that they have control, as they look down like gods, to be a solar Eye (de Certeau, 1984, p. 92). The complexity of a city becomes readable as they do not immerse themselves in the place. The elevation “transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 92). However, the world that the voyeur spectates from above can be a projection, a representation of the actual city, “the panorama-city is a ‘theoretical’ (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short, a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices.” One cannot see, understand and experience the everyday, the real practices of a city without being there. Thus, de Certeau claimed that “the ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins;” they are walkers (1984, p. 93). The walkers are blind, as they write the urban text without being able to read it, immersing themselves in the city. They invisibly change the urban text through everyday practices, using spaces that a voyeur cannot discern. Thus, they explore, feel and experience the city, a different city from what the voyeur spectates.

In the context of Instagram, the subversive user sees the platform from a distance, resembling a *voyeur*. By being there, she reads the place and its structures, debunking the dominant cognitive mechanism of the platform, while remaining outside of the popular discourse. She is not overwhelmed by the feelings that the place generates, being able to see clearly. However, she sometimes “visits” the place, as she participates in it occasionally producing content or scrolling on the platform. De Certeau used the word *voyeur* to describe the individuals who look down the city like gods. However, on Instagram, some users who see the platform from a distance, like voyeurs, also go down on the place, becoming *transients* of it. They visit the place and then they return to their distant position before getting involved with it. Being temporarily in the place, a transient is not affected by emotions while interacting with it. She does not delve into and bond with the place, as she keeps a clear gaze knowing that she will probably walk out of it. Consequently, she does not develop sentiments that may affect and guide her behavior. Yiota, as a subversive user and transient, does not perceive the place as something significant for her, as she is temporarily on the platform, ready to leave or delete her presence there. The *transient* does not invest in the platform. She does not devote time on it, build a solid presence or economically invest. She is on the platform keeping a distance, ready to leave whenever she wants without feeling any consequences, as for instance, she does not

care about her reputation and self-representation. Thus, a *transient* keeps a clear gaze that gives her freedom and the feeling of control, and thus, she is capable of leaving the platform e.g. deleting her profiles without caring about her content and her online identity or not entering the platform for weeks. The anxiety of the hectic pace of life and traffic or the omnipresent gaze of the others does not influence a *transient*. Her clear gaze and the feeling of control let her ignore the unspoken rules of the place. Therefore, she behaves against these “rules,” as, for instance, she produces anti-instagrammable content such as photographs that depict trash.

This user sometimes is on the platform and capitalizes on some of the place’s advantages while keeping the clear gaze of the voyeur. She finds joy in sharing her artistic content and expressing herself by communicating her work to her friends without worrying about the place’s conventions. She takes advantage of the platform, perceiving the space as she wants and using it as she needs. However, as a transient, she uses the place staying at its surface by using the basic and necessary tools that describe the platform, such as posting and scrolling, like a passenger who visits the main attractions of a place and then he/she leaves. Thus, she goes across Instagram but simultaneously abandons most places and tools without meeting them and discovering them, keeping a distance. Her short stay in the place does not let her find meaning in using tools that the residents and walkers of the platform fervently embrace, such as hashtags, filters, and location stamps. These tools do not make sense to her.

However, experiencing the platform as a *transient*, she walks the line between keeping the clear gaze of the voyeur and being tempted by the place’s strategies to deviate from the way she wants to use Instagram. Understanding that sometimes she is lured by the platform and devotes her time to glancing at everyday content, she feels anger, making her leave and elevate herself to see the platform from above.

The subversive user questions the norms of the platform, as well as its affordances and tools. These tools make sense when they are used in the context of Instagram and in relation to others, when one is on the platform and “walks” the place, being a “resident” of it and not just passing by. A good illustration of that is the case of the novice user who was interviewed, Ale. When she entered the platform, she still had the distance of the voyeur, questioning and ignoring its tools. However, delving into the place, she started using more and more of the platform’s tools, which started making sense to her while becoming an everyday activity as well, leaving the distance of the voyeur behind. Therefore, when Ale entered the platform, she was a voyeur who observed the place without participating in it but delving into the place and walking it, she transformed into a walker. Ale did not manage to keep the distance of a voyeur nor became a *transient*. Her interfering with the platform made her bond with the place, which became meaningful to her.

7.3 Towards users' resistance: walkers, transients and voyeurs

In the last section of this chapter I attempt a theorization of user positions according to the way they experience the platform. Social media users can be voyeurs, walkers, or transients of a place, positions that offer them different opportunities, possibilities but also restrictions.

Voyeurs can be users who just enter a platform having a distant clear gaze or users who passively participate in it, without producing content or with the platform, thus seeing the place from a distance. They can control their use and debunk the discourses and myths surrounding a platform. Their distant gaze and the detached use may be crucial for capitalizing on a place without being affected by the strategies, and this may be the critical point for resistance. Nonetheless, these users do not enjoy the advantages of a place or cannot alter it or invent and explore new opportunities, as they do not interact with it but solely spectate from a distance.

However, the actual practitioners, the *walkers*, do still live “down below,” proving that resistance is much more complicated. The pedestrians “make use of spaces that cannot be seen” (de Certeau, 1984) by those who invented and constructed the city. Each place and each road leads to specific destinations. Nonetheless, the people who inhabit the place are the ones who can change it, bringing their own experiences and giving their meaning to the place. Instagram may be a solid place constructed by strategies, but it is molded and reshaped as users walk, triggering new possibilities different from what strategies had predetermined. For instance, Griffin (2022) claimed that Instagram users can be exposed to ideas that they might not otherwise encounter. In addition, by interacting with a place that involves affective relays, individuals can transform it into a place of enrichment for them (see Duff, 2010). Delving and immersing themselves, walkers can explore an array of paths that may be hidden or not invented yet. The walkers may be blind, but they can invent new possibilities and exploit the system in ways that a transient or a voyeur cannot, as by solely passing by a place and keeping a distance from it, they cannot explore the place and its possibilities. Nonetheless, walkers may be the genuine practitioners of the city; yet they mingle with it, making it difficult to see it from a distance. Walkers develop sentiments, feel familiar with the place and invest in it, they become part of it, and thus, it is difficult for them to leave it. Almost every user, even the oppositional ones, expressed great difficulty to delete their accounts or content or leave the platform, as they invest their time and energy on building their online presence that becomes crucial for them. Walking the platform makes users part of the place, offering them possibilities but simultaneously restricting them and making them more vulnerable to be lured by the place's strategies.

Transients pass from a place when they want and then return to their distant position without bonding with it. Being in the distant position, they do not participate in the place and they do not care about what they leave behind. The way they use and participate in a place lies

somewhere between that of voyeurs and walkers. They do not devote much time to exploring and engaging with it. This allows them to keep a distance and have control over their use. In the study of Murumaa-Mengeland and Siibak (2019), their participants were asked to detox from social media for five days. The findings of the study showed that the distance that this detox offered to participants helped them. In particular, they “become aware of their time structures and take notice of the repetitive and cyclical character of the everyday temporal practices that reproduce social structures and norms” (Murumaa-Mengeland & Siibak, 2019, p. 274). In addition, they reflected on their usual practices (Murumaa-Mengeland & Siibak, 2019, p. 274). Distance seems to play a vital role in seeing and understanding a place and the self in relation to it – especially in the case of a *transient* who is not forced or asked to stay away from a place, but he/she intentionally chooses to leave a platform without caring and worrying about it. Thus, transients are not confronted with the barriers that users who detox from a platform may encounter, such as the desire to return or the fear of losing something important, as participants of the third study of the current dissertation claim (see Section 6.3.4, p.123, 126 for more details). At the same time, transients enjoy some of the advantages the place offers by being temporarily there. Still, distance is not the ultimate solution to resistance, as it does not let them capitalize on all the possibilities and opportunities of a place. In addition, by being there, transients can possibly be lured by the place’s strategies which can drive them to stay longer in the place and delve into it.

Each position can develop different practices of resistance and benefit from the platform at various levels while strategies can differently affect them. Resistance is not located solely at one type of use. Each position can offer users a fruitful ground with different ways and opportunities for resistance and negotiation while also having different barriers and restrictions stemming from the strategies of the place. Table 8 presents a typology of user positions regarding platform’s power. It brings to attention the position and relation of each user to a place, as well as their feelings and how they connect to the place’s strategies. This model offers a different typology to approach user agency, combining both the findings of the studies focusing on the platform’s power and also on the one focusing on user agency, stressing the significant role that the relation with a place plays in power relations.

WALKERS		TRANSIENTS	VOYEURS
<p>Active participation</p> <p>Position: in the place</p> <p>Relation to the place invest in the place develop sentiments attached to the place being part of the place</p>		<p>Autonomous participation</p> <p>Position: in and out of the place occasionally visit the place</p> <p>Relation to the place detached use debunk discourses autonomous use do not invest in the place</p>	<p>Passive participation <i>do not produce content</i></p> <p>Position: out of the place seeing the place from a distance</p> <p>Relation to the place detached use debunk discourses</p>
<p>Hegemonic use</p> <p>(-) follow the place's strategies and norms (-) blind use</p> <p>lured by the place's strategies</p>	<p>Non-hegemonic use</p> <p>(+) reshape the place (+) explore new possibilities and opportunities</p> <p>vulnerable to being lured by the place's strategies</p>	<p>(+) control of use (+) enjoy some of the place's advantages</p> <p>(-) distance does not let them capitalize on all possibilities and opportunities of a place</p> <p>prone to be lured by the place's strategies</p>	<p>(+) resistant to the place's strategies</p> <p>(-) do not enjoy the advantages of a place (-) do not explore opportunities</p>

Table 8 Typology of user positions regarding platform's power

8. Contributions and Limitations

8.1 Contributions

As part of the field of critical internet studies, this dissertation engaged with the Instagram materiality along with its surrounding discourses and its users, having investigated the power relations articulated on the platform. Through the three empirical studies that have been conducted, it methodologically, empirically and theoretically contributes to the field, as it is analyzed in detail below.

8.1.2 Methodological contributions

First and foremost, the research contributes to the field methodologically. The first study employs the interface analysis method, combining two approaches to analyze the platform's materiality. Stanfill (2015) introduced the discursive interface analysis, which, in the current study has been combined and enriched by the approach of MacLeod and McArthur (2019). In particular, the combination of the two approaches suggests to separately analyze each platform's widget and affordance employing the Stanfill's three affordances categories and the six components of interface widgets that MacLeod and McArthur introduced (see Section 4.2, page 46 for more details). In addition, following Bucher's (2012) approach of technography, the interface analysis method is accompanied by the analysis of the discourse surrounding Instagram. As Bucher (2016) argues, discourse plays a vital role in the analysis of a platform as well as of the socio-technical assemblage to which it belongs. Thus, the surrounding discourses enriched the overall analysis of the interface. A similar method that could have been used is that of the walkthrough method which, according to researchers, can be applied to applications (see Light et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the applied interface analysis provides a more detailed analysis of the platform design. In particular, although the walkthrough method entails a tool that resembles Stanfill's approach, Light et al. (2018) do not elaborate on why the method focuses merely on applications. Furthermore, researchers may miss some information and crucial entities that belong to the platform's broader sociotechnical assemblage, as, for instance, the role of algorithms or discourses surrounding an application have not been included in their approach. The interface analysis applied in the first study of the dissertation (see Section 4.2) provides a valuable, practical and straightforward tool to critically analyze software.

As Caliandro and Graham (2020) claimed, there is a pressing need for Instagram native research strategies, as Instagram is a platform that should be methodologically approached in a different way than other platforms, as a result of its several significant methodological challenges, primarily due to the platform's content (namely images and videos), and the restrictions on the access to Instagram's API. The second study of this Ph.D. dissertation proposes the algorithmic auditing methods as a valuable methodological tool that can be

employed in critical approaches to the study of platformization. The algorithmic auditing has also been used by Tyler Quick (2021), who investigates the “gay Instagram” and the algorithms’ role in determining which influencers might be made visible. The current dissertation applied this method, bypassing the methodological challenges and the need for computational tools, as all the data were gathered manually. However, the use of this method also stresses the need for a tool to be developed to enable the automatic collection of recommendations from Instagram’s mobile version and Explore page, as the manual collection resulted in limited data.

The third study empirically employs Shaw’s model of using positions (Shaw, 2017). The three categories of use that Shaw introduced are enriched by empirical data, while another position – that of subversive use – has been added to the model based also on Milioni’s (2015) model of agency. In particular, the user positions have been analyzed and discussed in depth while additional crucial characteristics have been added to describe each category. In addition, user agency and positions have been analyzed through de Certeau’s approach regarding strategies and tactics. Thus, building on Shaw’s model and combining it with de Certeau’s and Milioni’s (2015) approach, we can take this model a step further, stressing the importance of place and time, the cognitive structuring devices and users’ feelings about the system of power and, at the same time, bringing into attention the notions of voyeur, walker and transient. This renewed approach can be used in other studies in order to understand and analyze individuals’ actions, behavior and feelings with regard to a platform’s power and users’ resistance.

8.1.3 Empirical and theoretical contribution

8.1.3.1 The Instagram platform

As it has already been mentioned, several researchers underestimate Instagram’s power, characterizing it as an insignificant, superficial platform for entertainment, as Abidin (2016a) has pointed out. Some of the interviewees of the current study also have this attitude regarding the Instagram platform. However, the findings of the dissertation stress the necessity to not ignore platforms devoted to entertainment and everyday life, highlighting the impacts on users’ everyday life. Researchers should not turn their back on things that may seem superficial. This is also stressed by Caliandro and Graham, who mention that Instagram has “an enormous impact on people’s everyday lives on many levels and so clearly it deserves rigorous academic attention” (2020, p. 2). So far, studies related to Instagram mainly focus on specific groups of people and topics, such as feminism, influencers, body positivity, pregnancy (see Abidin, 2016a; Abidin, 2016b; Cotter, 2019; Cwynar-Horta, J., 2016; Tiidenberg & Baym, 2017). Caldeira et al. (2021) explored ordinary women on Instagram and specifically their self-representational practices, stressing that through their research “call for greater attentiveness to the everyday contexts of social media” practices and to the “ordinary” users who comprise

the vast majority of Instagram's user base (p. 1087). The current dissertation approaches Instagram as a whole investigating Instagram's "ordinary" use and users and revealing the significant role that the platform plays in users' everyday life.

8.1.3.2 Understanding power relations

Through the first two studies, the current Ph.D. dissertation reveals the power mechanisms that Instagram employs and the user subjectivities and norms it constructs through them. Thus, it contributes to understanding the ways in which the platform, as a sociotechnical construct, and the discursive modes of power work together, a need to which Carah and Shaul (2016) stressed that we should draw our attention. In addition, analyzing the data from both studies, I elaborate on the implications of Instagram's use on users and their everyday lives. The results of the first study and the observations about the "standardization of content," "aestheticization," "depoliticization," together with the platform's inscribed subjectivities can be used as a framework that can be applicable across other social media platforms that go beyond the Instagram formats. In addition, by combining the results of these studies and, thus, informing the third one, the power relations are explored in depth without neglecting users' agency. This Ph.D. research contributes to the field of critical internet studies and new media research bringing into light: i. which mechanisms drive users toward a dominant use of the Instagram platform, ii. what dissociates users from it, generating ambivalence, and iii. which mechanisms Instagram employs to alleviate users' feelings of ambivalence. Therefore, it provides an insight into which mechanisms can act as barriers to user agency, what makes users more vulnerable to platform's power and, at the same time, what can be a trigger for resistance.

The Instagram place is constructed by robust strategies that are difficult for users to overcome, while the platform has developed strategies to urge users toward its ideal use. This dissertation sheds light on the strategies that regularize and neutralize users' actions of resistance, identifying problematic areas of the Instagram platform. These outcomes provide a fruitful ground for researchers, designers and activists to build upon and develop tools and practices so as to raise users' awareness and to empower citizens, driving them toward a more emancipatory use of the platform. In addition, they can be used to improve users' experience and fortify the public with the power to better understand social media platforms. Thus, the findings of the research can inform policies or tools designed by agencies or collectivities who aim at limiting corporate platforms' impacts on users and strengthening users' agency, control and understanding - in short, users' digital, algorithm and data literacy.

8.1.3.3 Instagram algorithms

In the last few years, the existence of filter bubbles has become a debatable topic in the field of internet studies. Several researchers have already indicated presence of filter bubbles in

digital platforms (see Feuz et al., 2011; Bakshy et al., 2015; Salehi et al., 2015; Kulshrestha et al., 2017; Barker, 2018), while others challenge their impacts and even their existence (see Burns, 2019; Dutton et al., 2017). However, in the case of Instagram, the investigation of the filter bubble assumption is underexplored at present. The current dissertation contributes to the ongoing debate on personalization algorithms, shedding light on how Instagram algorithms work. In particular, it shows that most users are trapped within a filter bubble of mainstream and commercial content regardless of their interests and online profiles. Thus, the study contributes to the aforementioned debate and to the studies that focus on the implications of personalization algorithms, urging for further investigation of this phenomenon.

8.1.3.4 Investigating user agency

The current dissertation does not ignore users' power. On the contrary, it contributes to the investigation of user agency. The findings of the study prove that users are not passive but implicitly or explicitly develop resistant practices. This research elaborates on a fourth state of user agency, that of the subversive use. This position seems critical for user agency, as subversive users seem to have found a mechanism so as to defy platform norms.

Furthermore, to better understand and explain user agency and power relations, the dissertation brings into attention the notion of *walker* and *voyeur*, drawing on de Certeau (1984), while introducing a new term, that of the *transient*. By discussing and analyzing these terms, the current dissertation indicates the nuances of users' agency concerning the platform's power, making clear the complex relationship between users and the platform. It also shows that resistance can be found in several places and using positions, suggesting paying attention also to users that may just spectate the platform or temporarily use it.

As it has been mentioned, voyeurs can be users who do not actively participate in a place, but just spectate it from above. By proposing to look at the terms of voyeur and transient, the current research suggests that non-participation can be a way for users to resist by just spectating without actively participating in a platform or by participating for a while and then returning to a distant use. The heart of the resistance by these users is their distant position and detached or, otherwise, autonomous use of the platform. The dissertation brings into attention user positions that may have been neglected, discussing that sometimes passivity can lead to a more emancipating use of the platform than active "participation." Casemajor et al. (2015) claimed that non-participation can be a way for users to disrupt a platform in purpose through several practices, such as obfuscation, sabotage, or exodus. However, voyeurs and transients do not intentionally disrupt a platform. In addition, the current research also stresses the complexity of agency and resistance without ignoring the practices and power of the walkers, namely the users who delve into the platform and actively participate in it.

In addition, based on de Certeau's approach, the analysis also suggests drawing a parallel between place and platforms in order to explore and understand the complex relations between users and social media. Seeing platforms as places that can be transformed into spaces by users, as well as introducing three terms voyeur, walker, and transient enriches our understanding of user agency. This perspective can be used in other contexts and platforms in order to explore power relations. Therefore, this Ph.D. dissertation introduces a new approach to discussing user resistance and the platforms' power in the new media ecosystem.

8.2 Limitations, Future Research and Proposed Public Actions

The current Ph.D. dissertation, through its theoretical framework and the findings of the studies, highlights the crucial role that discourses surrounding platforms play in how power relations are articulated. The first study indicates how the study of discourses can enrich an interface analysis contributing to the interpretation of the role of affordances, designers' choices and platforms' politics. However, the discourse surrounding Instagram was one part of an extensive research design including multiple studies and parameters to be explored and analyzed. Therefore, it was not possible to analyze in depth the various discourses revolving around the platform. Despite this shortage, I wish to direct researchers' attention to the thorough investigation of discourses when studying social technologies. Secondly, based on the findings of the Study #3, namely the one that focuses on users' agency, I argue that the popularization of academic terms related to digital media and their impact through several documentaries and articles can make users aware of platforms' power. However, sometimes instead of empowering them, this knowledge and acquired awareness can also make them ignore the power of platforms or see it as unimportant because of a false sense of control – especially when it's not accompanied by concrete strategies or conceptual and practical tools applicable to everyday use. Therefore, investigating how platforms are conceptualized through discourse as well as how users perceive them can be a fruitful ground in order to better understand power relations.

The second study focuses on Instagram algorithms, employing the algorithmic auditing method. Audit studies may sometimes provide “fuzzy glimpses” of how algorithms operate (Diakopoulos, as cited in Kitchin, 2017, p. 24). Thus, this study can be the basis for researchers to repeat the present inquiry by employing accounts of actual users instead of constructed ones. In addition, the study has not focused on the so-called big data. Therefore, the current research stresses the need for the appropriate tools to be developed in order to enable researchers to collect recommendations (i.e., the Explore page) from Instagram's mobile version using methods introduced by computational social sciences, with more complex parameters and nuanced use patterns.

Regarding the third study, the interviews were conducted with Greek and Greek-Cypriot participants. The interviews' outcomes can be enriched by repeating the interviews with individuals from various countries and cultural backgrounds. In addition, although the study tried to include interviewees with multiple characteristics, such as activists and influencers, more cases can be explored, which can provide more data. For instance, studies can focus the notion of voyeur, exploring users who do not actively participate on the platform but spectate it from a distance. Thus, user agency can be investigated through non-participation in a platform. The outcomes from the first two studies, as well as the categorization of users, can be used as a basis to explore in depth user agency, practices, feelings and beliefs.

Last but not least, although the current Ph.D. dissertation outlines the Instagram assemblage identifying the heterogeneous entities and the relations among them, it has not investigated all of its entities. The economy and the market, the Instagram business model, laws and institutions and advertisers have not been explored in depth in the current research design. Future research can focus on different entities unpacking the socio-technical assemblage in order to better understand the relations between the heterogeneous elements and the power relations of the platform.

As mentioned above, the findings of the current dissertation can indicate ways to foster and amplify critical thinking – for instance, paying attention to the ways users relate to a place and use time. In addition, by identifying cases where users instinctively try to resist the platform's power, we can instrumentalize these attempts so as to assist them further. First of all, as has already been mentioned, the findings can inform policies and reinforce public actions empowering citizens and restricting the power of commercial platforms. This study indicates that actions should be taken in terms of transparency. Based on the results of the second study, which focuses on algorithms, the platform must become more open and transparent regarding its algorithmic processes. For instance, the platform could add affordances enabling users to monitor their recommended content. In particular, a tool could be added that would notify users about what kind of content they receive, namely the topic category and its source. Furthermore, given the significant role of awareness and knowledge, the platform could inform users about how its recommendation system works. In addition, based on the current research, it is most challenging for users to control their use and leave Instagram, resulting in an inability to handle their negative sentiments and well-being. Platforms should provide an affordance that supports a “detox” option aiding this decision. Since commercial platforms render most difficult for users to deactivate their accounts, users should be reminded about this possibility. Furthermore, researchers should be allowed to collect data from the platform under specific circumstances and when the collection aims to bring transparency and fairness to automated systems.

Secondly, the current findings can be used to inform the design of tools that attempt to strengthen users' agency and raise people's awareness. They can also provide directions on

how users' relationship with platforms can meliorate, ceding users more control over their use. This dissertation presents an illustration of such attempts, which can possibly raise people's awareness, lead to a more conscious use of new media platforms, and trigger resistance. In addition, as the Instagram platform is especially popular among teenagers, the findings can support the creation of educational projects and social media literacy strategies for schools to assist young users in becoming active and knowledgeable citizens and "netizens." Studies (see Skrubbeltrang et al., 2017; Cotter, 2019), as well as some of this research's interviews, indicate that the awareness of some users (e.g., oppositional users) regarding how the platform and specifically algorithms work can result in implicit or explicit practices of resistance. Therefore, I believe that raising individuals' awareness about the algorithmic curation is crucial, as they can clearly benefit from that (Eslami et al., 2015). However, awareness is not always translated into practices of resistance, but "providing a visual narrative for algorithmic processes has the potential to educate users" (Eslami et al., 2015, p. 161) and support literacy. For that purpose, based on the results of the current dissertation, a website named *Instabubble* (see <https://cis.cut.ac.cy/~instabubble/>) has been created as an effort to increase users' awareness of Instagram algorithms. This website visualizes and presents the findings of Audit 2.2 study (see Section 5.5.2). The page starts by introducing users to the topic, namely the focus on the Instagram's personalization results (see Figure 27).

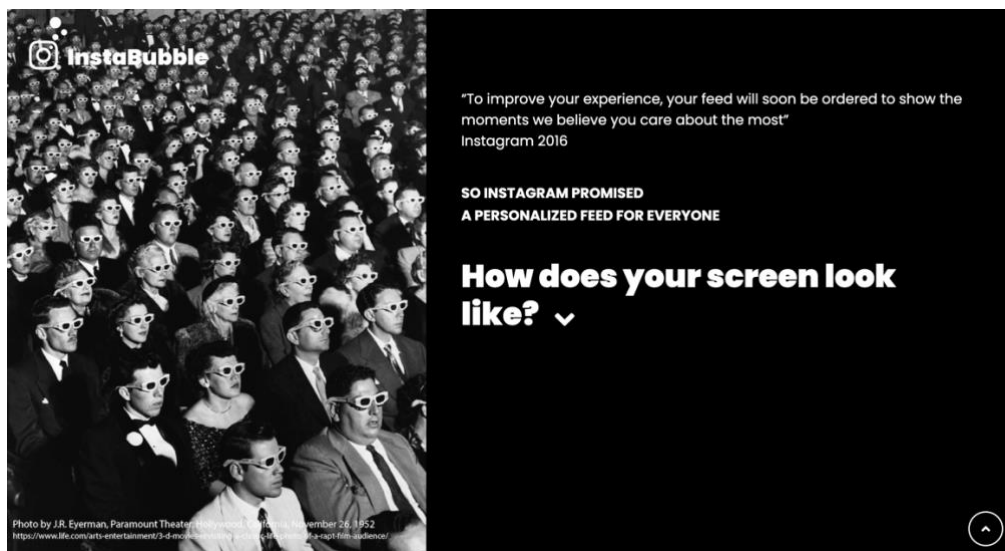


Figure 27 Instabubble: the introduction on the website

Then, the two constructed personas together with their interests are presented, while users are invited to imagine what recommendations they would receive if they were one of these personas. In addition, the methodology of this project along with some terms used on the website, such as "the spectacle," are explained (see Figure 28, Figure 29).

How does the world look like if you follow Instagram's recommendations?



User A

User A is interested in soft topics, namely mainstream culture and commercial content, such as brands, fitness, cute animals and celebrity news.



User B

User B is interested in non-commercial and non-mainstream content, namely politics, alternative media, activism and topics like climate change and animal abuse.

Figure 28 Instabubble: the constructed user profiles

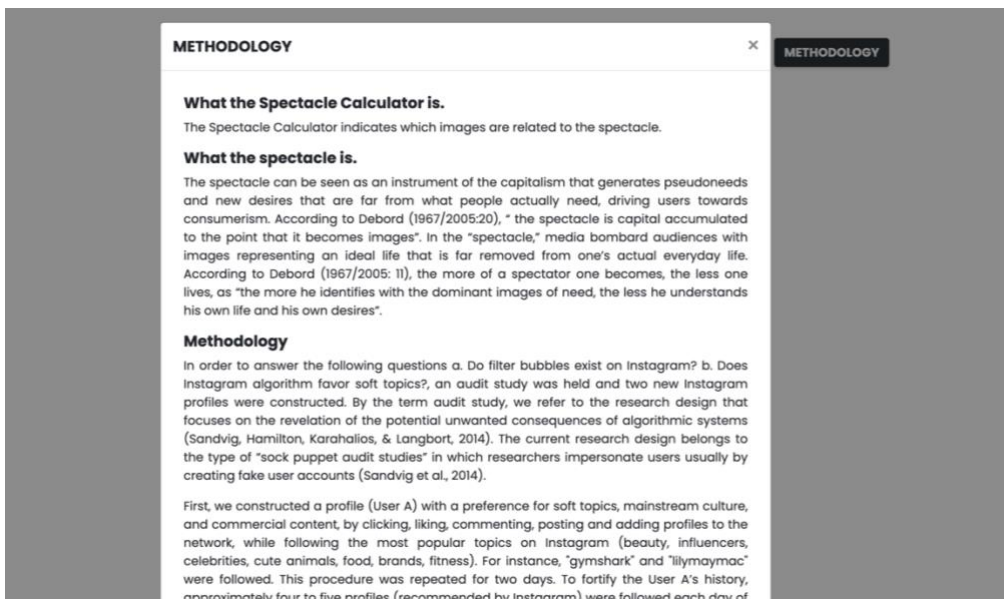


Figure 29 Instabubble: describing the methodology and terms

Then, scrolling down, users see some indicative posts that each profile was recommended (see Figure 30). The images were selected from the data gathered during Audit 2.2, and the number of images chosen related to the spectacle and lifeworld topics is proportional to the overall number of images recommended to each profile. Users can press the “Spectacle Calculator” button that reveals the proportion of images related to the spectacle and lifeworld topics each account was recommended, while, at the same time, a purple border appears in the photographs that are related to mainstream and commercial topics (see Figure 31). Thus, users can easily locate these images, and compare the two profiles and their suggestions. Users can also click

each post. Then, they are taken to the Instagram platform and, thus, they can also explore the recommended by the algorithm accounts.

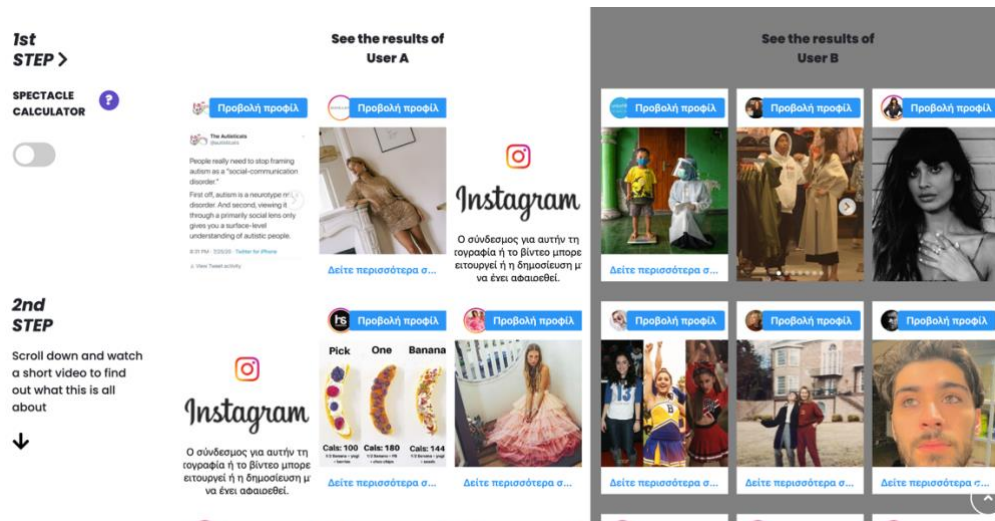


Figure 30 Instabubble: recommendations presented to each user profile

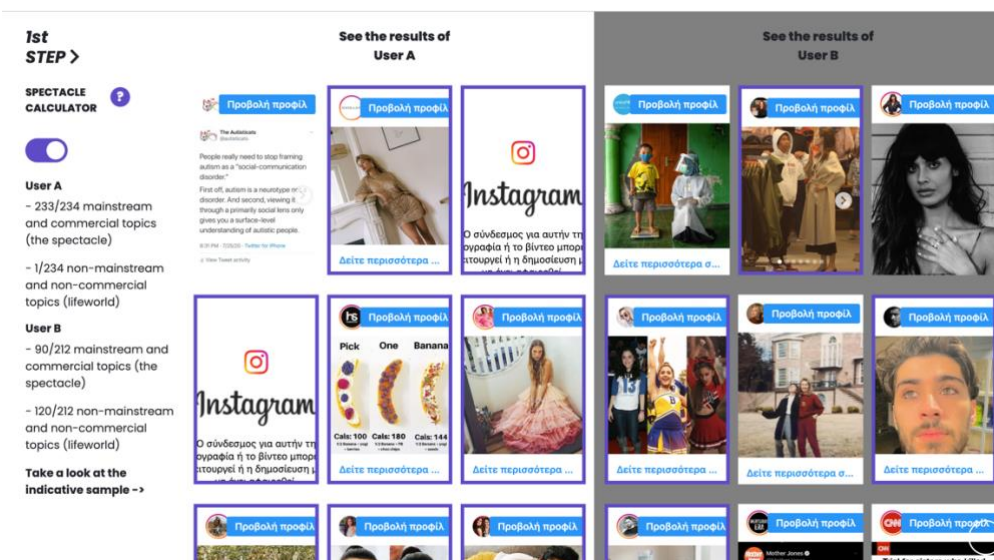


Figure 31 Instabubble: the use of the spectacle Calculator

After have being exposed to the profiles' suggestions making their own thoughts, users can watch a one-minute explanatory video (see Figure 32) aiming to provide users with an "insight" on Instagram algorithms, concluding with a thought-provoking question "What are the stimuli that you receive on Instagram? Take a step back and think: 'How does my feed look like?'" Finally, users are invited to think if they are trapped in a filter bubble. Simultaneously, they are asked to get in contact with the project's team and share their experiences and thoughts (see Figure 33). The project is a way to disseminate the findings of the research and provide users with an "insight" on algorithms, expecting to raise awareness and lead to a more conscious use of the platform. This project is a starting point in order to answer the questions regarding how users can aptly be informed about digital platforms and an indicative illustration of how the findings of this research can be used on a practical level in the "real world."

**2nd
STEP >**

**Watch this video
and get more information!**



Figure 32 Instabubble: the explanatory video

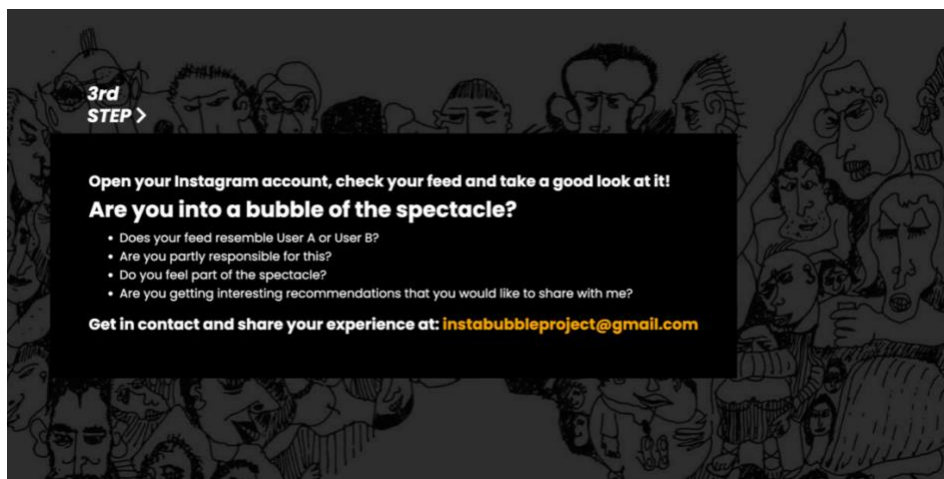


Figure 33 Instabubble: thought provoking message and get in contact information

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Appendix 1 Instagram discourse

Author	Date	Title	Retrieved	Source
Instagram-press	March 19, 2019a	Introducing Checkout on Instagram	November 20	https://instagram-press.com/blog/2019/03/19/instagram-checkout/
Instagram-press	November 01, 2018f	Sharing Your Election Day Excitement on Instagram	November 20	https://instagram-press.com/blog/2018/11/01/sharing-your-election-day-excitement-on-instagram/
Instagram-press	May 10, 2018h	Introducing the Emoji Slider	November 20	https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/introducing-the-emoji-slider-sticker
Instagram-press	September 28, 2017c	A New Face Filter to Customize Your Look and Transport Yourself to New Places	November 20	https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/customize-your-look-and-transport-yourself-to-new-places
Instagram-press	December 05, 2017d	Introducing Stories Highlights and Stories Archive	November 20	https://instagram-press.com/blog/2017/12/05/introducing-stories-highlights-and-stories-archive/
Instagram-press	June 28, 2018e	Introducing Music in Stories	November 20	https://instagram-press.com/blog/2018/06/28/introducing-music-in-stories/
Instagram-press	November 21, 2016b	New Ways to Share in the Moment	November 20	https://instagram-press.com/blog/2016/11/21/new-ways-to-share-in-the-moment/
Instagram-press	October 03, 2017b	Introducing Polls in Instagram Stories	November 20	https://instagram-press.com/blog/2017/10/03/introducing-polls-in-instagram-stories/
Instagram-press	July 10, 2018b	Introducing the Questions Sticker	November 20	https://instagram-press.com/blog/2018/07/10/introducing-the-questions-sticker/
Instagram-press	August 17, 2017a	New Ways to Reply with Photos and Videos	November 20	https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/new-ways-to-reply-with-photos-and-videos
Instagram-press	May 09, 2019b	@shop Is Now Open	November 20	https://instagram-press.com/blog/2019/05/09/shop/
Instagram-press	November 15, 2018i	Introducing more ways to shop on Instagram	November 20	https://instagram-press.com/blog/2018/11/15/introducing-more-ways-to-shop-on-instagram/
Instagram-press	June 12, 2018d	Bringing Shopping to Instagram Stories	November 20	https://instagram-press.com/blog/2018/06/12/shopping-in-instagram-stories/
Instagram-press	June 26, 2018c	Introducing Video Chat, a New Explore, and More	November 20	https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/new-story-camera-effects-video-chat-and-explore-features
Instagram-press	August 31, 2016a	Introducing Zoom	November 20	https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/introducing-zoom-on-instagram
Instagram-press	June 07, 2018a	Introducing @mention sharing	November 20	https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/introducing-mentions-sharing-for-instagram-stories

Appendix 2 Indicative coding scheme of thematic analysis – Instagram discourse

MAIN THEME	CODES	INDICATIVE EXTRACT
#consumption	#easy #swipe #skip around	
#production	#everyday moments #continous production #upgrade reality #positive content #creative tools #in the moment #freely	Face filters, text styles and stickers help turn casual moments into experiences you can't wait to share" (2018c) #upgrade reality
#production #story	#in the moment #feel comfortable sharing #help business connect with community #dissapear - #spontaneous #pressure-free	"Send anything you want, from product sneak-peeks to your worst selfies" #dissapear #brands #pressure-free
#communication	#friends #share feelings #community #positive ambience #get closer #all in one convenient place #for brands	"Instagram Stories is now used by 400 million every day, and we're excited to give our community new ways to feel closer to their friends and followers" #community
#Instagram as a shop	#inspiration #love brands #place of action #discover #easy (save, tap tags) #creative #all in one place #ubiquitous #shop as celebration #consumerism #latest trends	"With the holidays just around the corner, we're making it easier than ever to turn to Instagram for all of your holiday shopping needs." #brands #pressure-free "one can never have too many statement barrettes" #consumerism
#Instagram as a shop #shoppers	#savvy shoppers #connection with brands #community	"Shoppers on Instagram are savvy. They visit Instagram looking for the latest trends and styles." #savvy
#politics #vote	#excitment #show	"Simply tap the "We Voted!" story to see your friends' voting excitement"

Appendix 3 Discourse - Google search engine

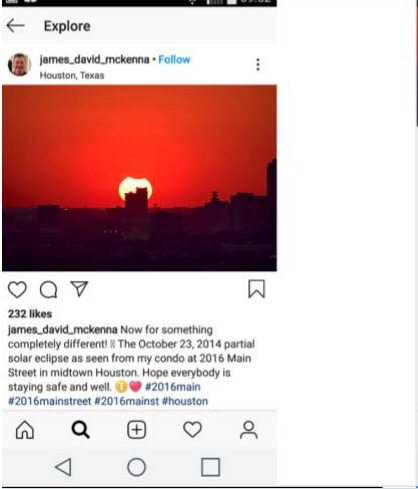

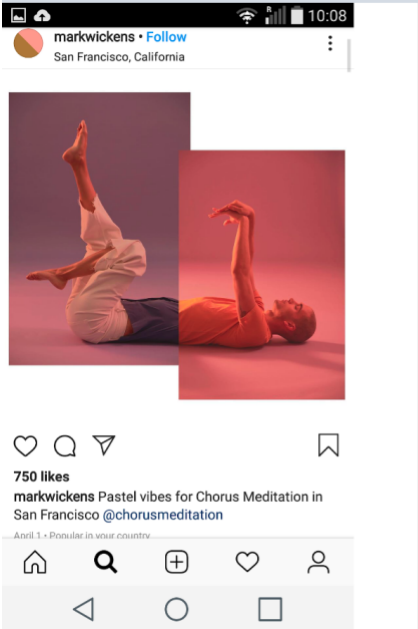
Keyword	Author/ Company	Date	Title/ Service	Retrieved	Source
Instagram Use	C. Forsey	Nov. 2019	How to Use Instagram: A Beginner's Guide	November, 5	https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/how-to-use-instagram
	E. Moreau	Sept. 2019	What Is Instagram, Anyway? Here's what Instagram is all about and how people are using it	November, 5	https://www.lifewire.com/what-is-instagram-3486316
	E. Moreau	Sept. 2019	11 Instagram Tips for Beginners Follow these essential tips when getting started on Instagram	November, 5	https://www.lifewire.com/instagram-tips-for-beginners-3485872
	R. Ahmari	Oct. 2019	How to Use Instagram	November, 5	https://www.wikihow.com/Use-Instagram
	G. Burgett	March, 2018	How to use Instagram Here's a few tips and tricks to get the most out of Instagram	November, 5	https://www.digitaltrends.com/mobile/how-to-use-instagram/
Instagram story	storiesig	n.d	Instagram Stories Download	November, 5	https://storiesig.com/
	Instagram help center	n.d	Instagram help center		https://help.instagram.com/
	Ariana grande	n.d	Instagram profile	November, 5	https://www.instagram.com/arianagrande/?hl=en
		n.d	Anonymous Instagram	November, 5	https://insta-stories.ru/
		n.d	Story insta	November, 5	https://www.storyinsta.com/
	Instaview.me	n.d	Download Instagram stories & videos & photos	November, 5	https://instaview.me/
Instagram hashtags	all-hashtag	n.d	Top hashtags. Increase your reach by using top hashtags in your posts.	November, 5	https://www.all-hashtag.com/top-hashtags.php
	A. Gotter	Nov. 2019	Instagram Hashtags: How to Find the Most Popular Hashtags and Connect with New Followers	November, 5	https://www.shopify.com/blog/instagram-hashtags
	A. Roach	Nov. 2019	The Ultimate Guide to the Best Instagram Hashtags for Likes	November, 5	https://www.oberlo.com/blog/best-instagram-hashtags-for-likes
	Top Hashtags	Sem. 2019	Top 100 HashTags on Instagram	November, 5	https://top-hashtags.com/instagram/
	Top Hashtags	n.d	Top Hashtags for Instagram Copy and Paste Top Instagram Hashtags – Top Instagram Tags for Likes and Followers	November, 5	https://tophashtags.net/top-instagram-hashtags/
	Hashtags for like	n.d	Tools to grow your Instagram	November, 5	https://www.hashtagsforlikes.co/

	Influencer Marketing Hub	Sempt. 2019	The Ultimate List of the Most Popular Instagram Hashtags on the Planet	November, 5	https://influencermarketinghub.com/25-most-popular-instagram-hashtags/
Instagram explore	Instagram	n.d	Instagram Explore page	November, 5	https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/explorepage/?hl=en
	N. Canning	May 2019	The Ultimate Guide to Getting on the Instagram Explore Page	November, 5	https://later.com/blog/how-to-get-on-instagram-explore-page/
	R. Carter	Aug. 2019	How to Get on the Instagram Explore Page	November, 5	https://sproutsocial.com/insights/instagram-explore/
	Instagram press	n.d	Read announcements about all topic	November, 5	https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/
	G. Pepe	April 2019	How to get on the Instagram Explore Page	November, 5	https://jumpermedia.co/how-to-get-on-instagram-explore-page/

Appendix 4 Indicative coding scheme of thematic analysis –Google search engine discourse

MAIN THEME	CODES	INDICATIVE EXTRACT
#production	#normalization of specific content # normalization of exposure of everyday life	“Who doesn't know this on Instagram? You go out to eat and want to share your food with the whole world.” #normalization of exposure of everyday life
#strategy	#hashtags #filters # frequency # Heavily-edited post	“How to perfect your Instagram photo”
#aesthetics #prefered content	# candid video stories #ideal representation #less text #animation #everyday life #evoke emotion #soft topics	“look diverse ” #ideal representation
#popularity/ commercialization	#popularity the reason to produce #significant #limiting creativity #restritions #follow a strategy #adverise everyday moments	“it would be odd for you to post ten photos from the same beach vacation on your Instagram.” #restrictions “The more comments and likes you get, the likelier you are to find your place on the Instagram Explore page” #significant
#human relations	#commercalization human relations #third party tool to keep your followers	Post Often to Keep Followers Interested - posting once a day – or at least once every other day – should be frequent enough to keep your current followers interested #commercalization
#standardization of content	#tools that create content without too much hassle #use popular tags	“Choosing a popular tag is never a bad idea” #use popular tags

Appendix 5 Indicative illustration of the recommendations collected during Audit 1.1 and their analysis.

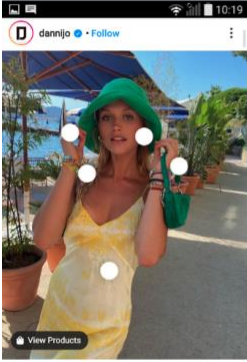


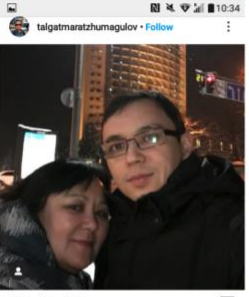
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O
Image/Video			ID	I/V Category	Conceptualization	Text	Likes/Views	Hashtags	Location	Time stamp	Profile	Followers	Comments	Commerciality
	 <p> 232 likes james_david_mckenna Now for something completely different! The October 23, 2014 partial solar eclipse as seen from my condo at 2016 Main Street in midtown Houston. Hope everybody is staying safe and well. 🥰❤️ #2016main #2016mainstreet #2016mainst #houston #houstonx #houstontexas #ighouston #silhouette #silhouettes #skylinesilhouette #texasfever #inspiretexasnow #igtexas #cityscapes #urbanlandscapes #urbanlandscapes #landscape #landscapes #2016mainstreetcondos #sunset #sunset #solareclipse #solareclipse2014 #102314 #eclipse #partialsolareclipse #partialsolareclipse2014 #october23rd2014 #solar 2 days ago · Popular in your country </p>		1.23	Landscape, sunset, nature, rare	1. rare 2. home	covid #hope everybody is staying safe and well unique#something completely different	232		Texas	2 days ago	ordinary user	10.1K	idyllic	No (ord. user)
			1.64	person	aesthetic, atmospheric, filters	pastel vibes	750	promotional	california	April 1	Photographer/business profile, frequent user	13,2K		expl. promotional, promote other users, impl. promotional, link to his website



1.67	landscape, nature, snow	personal, fascinating, ideal	had a fun time, staying home, never edited, Do you like it? covid 2019, call for interaction	2,293	canada	3 days ago	photographer/business profile (+courses), regular user	81,4K	impl. promotional/link u
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1.24	animal, everydaylife	1. hope, positive message	1. covid #together #the light at the end of the tunnel is coming, 2. discounts	441	#love #smile #instagram dogs oregon	14 h ago	Pet/business profile, frequent user	94,1 K	expl. promotional, links U, Business profile (implicitly)
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Appendix 6 Indicative illustration of the recommendations collected during Audit #2 and their analysis.

PROFILE 1/CONTENT	ID	CATEGORY	LIKES/VEWS	S/A/U	Link	PROFILE 2/CONTENT	ID	CATEGORY	LIKES	COMMENTS	S/A/U	LINKS
 <p>Profile: dannjo • Follow</p> <p>2,939 likes</p> <p>dannjo Hi! Bye! @chloeclareux in the Limoncello Slip, Winona Hoops and #amparty</p>	1.4	BRAND/SHOP	2,939	S	https://www.instagram.com/p/CC8aKjwn5Pw/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link	 <p>Profile: unicef • Follow</p> <p>36,346 likes</p> <p>unicef #COVID19 is hitting children harder than you might think. The economic impacts of the pandemic have left millions of families unable to access or afford their regular supplies of nutritious food. Children are now eating less food and lower quality diets. 6.7 million more could become severely undernourished this year and the effects could last a lifetime - unless we act now.</p> <p>© UNICEF/UNI350093/jazah</p>	1.3	UNICEF/HUMANITARIAN	36,346 (6.1 M - 246 POPULAR)		A	https://www.instagram.com/p/CDM7eHXgvgn/
 <p>Profile: ceotunde • Follow</p> <p>12,929 likes</p> <p>ceotunde Mr. Steal Yo Girl</p> <p>Follow @ceotunde for more!</p> <p>Follow my backup @reddtundel</p> <p>#aidemen #kai #miniminter #zerkaa #behzinga #tobizzle #tobji #Zs #wroctoshaw #vkikstar #vikikstar123 #aidemenmemes #kasimemes #aidemenclothing #sdm #ceotunde</p>	1.5	CELEBRITY	12,929	S	https://www.instagram.com/p/CC_ucyJp1Kq/	 <p>Profile: talgatmaratzhumagulov • Follow</p> <p>69 likes</p> <p>talgatmaratzhumagulov Сегодня, 29 июля, ю... more</p> <p>13 hours ago • Based on photos you liked • See Translation</p>	1.4	USER	69 (478 - 84)		U	https://www.instagram.com/p/CDMkqgYgx0E/



10.4

INFLUENCER/
STYLE

10.9K

COMMERCIAL
S

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/CDajVKEKypA/>



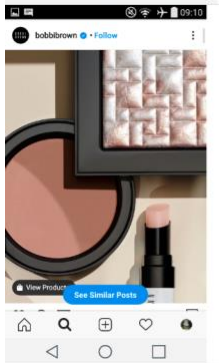
10.5

INFLUENCER

16.6 K

S

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/CDv10aNH5w2/>



10.5

PRODUCTS/
HOP/COSMETICS

11,35

S

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CD3uE6gnZaj/>



10.6

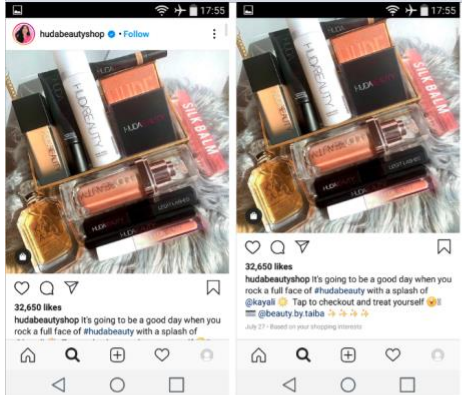
POLITICAL
FIGURE

127,312 (867K)

A

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CDw62gAswGE/>





5.4

BRANDS/SHOP/COSMETICS

32,650 POPULAR

S

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CJJeffcns0M/>



5.3

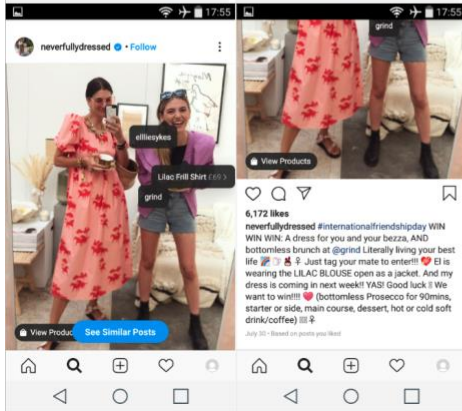
GOSSIP NEWS/FUN

19,438

The profile has appeared again

can't load posts

S



5.5

BRAND/SHOP/CLOTHING

6,172 POPULAR

S

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CQn6X3l8tz/>



5.4

NEWS/ COVID/

38,916 (2.5M -775)

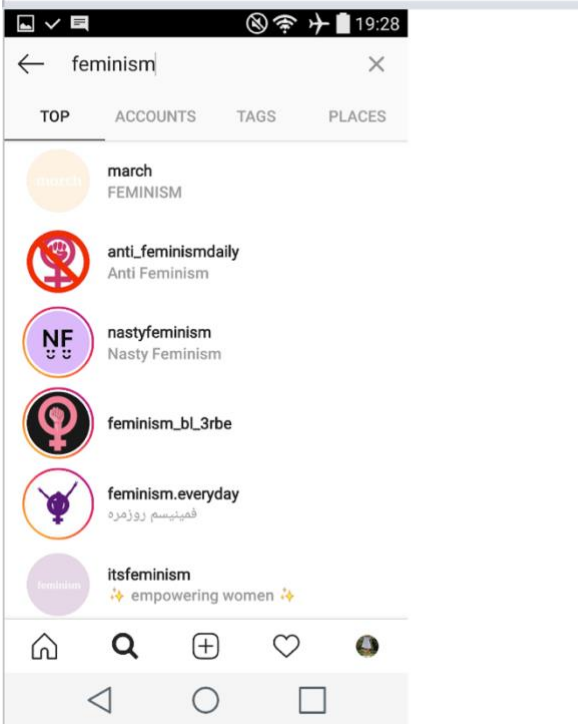
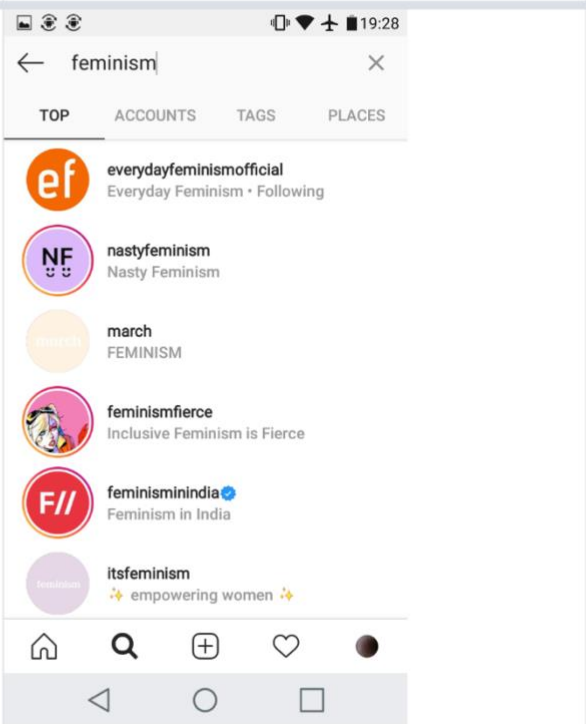
STORIES THAT MOVE

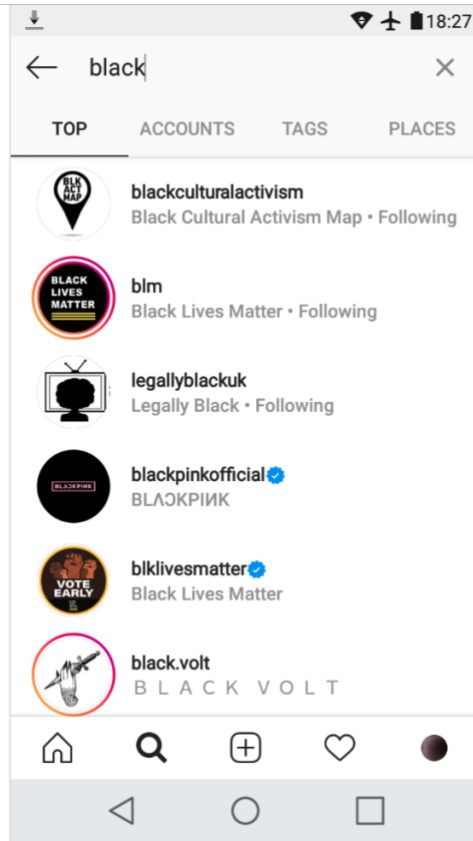
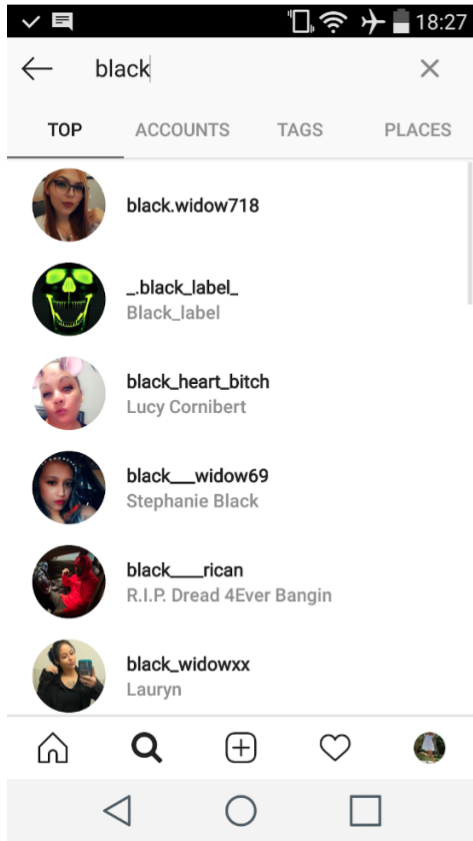
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CDS0-FREYg0/>

A



Appendix 7 Indicative illustration of the recommendations collected during Audit #3 and their analysis.

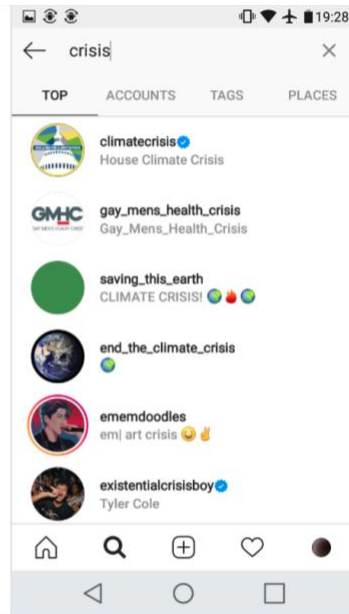
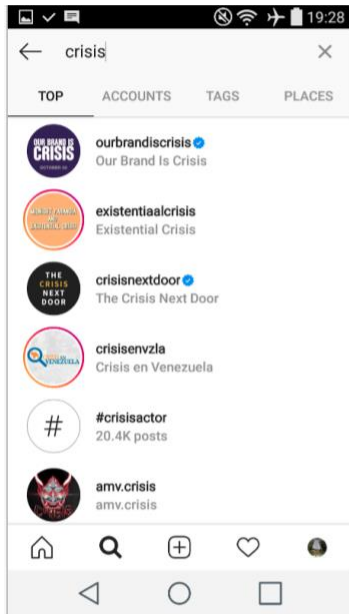
Prof 1	Prof 2		same profiles	notes
		<p>1. alternative 2. equal rights, 3. alternative 4. alternative 5. alternative 6. alternative</p>	<p>1. All feminism alternative profiles</p> <p>3</p>	<p>Both accounts were recommended alternative accounts related to feminism</p>



User accounts

all accounts related to black people voices only 4. brand

spectacle vs alternative (one brand)



1. movie, 2. movie 3. videos-opioid addicton, 4. Crisis en Venezuela 6. video, cartoons

1. climate 2. Gay Mens Health Crisis (GMHC) organization 3. environment 4. climate 5. cartoons 6. musician

0

spectacle (1 different - crisis en vnzl vs more alternative - climate etc but music and cartoons)

Appendix 8 Interview guide

General Questions

1. Questions about the interviewee (profession, age, etc.)
2. When did you start using Instagram and why?
Do you remember what you first thought about it? Your very first impression?
3. Which are the main reasons you use Instagram?
What other social media s/he uses (and how much)?
4. Do you know people that do not use Instagram? What kind of people? Would/do you recommend it to them (and why)?

Consumer

Endless and constantly renewed content – Passive consumption

5. How much time do you spend on Instagram per day?
6. How many times do you visit Instagram per day? (more than once?)
 - 6.1 When do you visit Instagram during the day, ex. in the morning, before going to sleep?
 - 6.2 Do you receive Instagram notifications or nudges on your mobile phone? For instance, Instagram sometimes notify users about a new post
 - 6.3 Why do you return on Instagram? Do you have a specific reason when you visit Instagram? What do you expect?
 - 6.4 Do you feel that you always find something new on Instagram?
7. What do you feel when using Instagram?
8. What do you usually do when you open Instagram? Please show me.
 - 8.1 Why are you visiting ,
 - 8.2 How much time do you usually spend on X
 - 8.3 (if they check their stories) Do you usually see all the stories of your followers?
 - 8.4 Do you usually ponder over the images on Instagram? If yes, when, what kind of photographs?
9. Do you usually observe for long a photograph before you press the like button?
10. Has a picture on Instagram made you ponder/raised some concerns for you over something?

11. Lets assume that you want to upload a story. How do you do that? Show me. *How can one apply a filter on their photograph? Or add a location stamp?* If they know – How did you find it? – Repetitive use etc.

Producer

Posts

12. What kind of images do you usually upload on Instagram? Why? How much time do you spend when uploading a photograph on Instagram?

12.1 What do people usually upload on Instagram? Would you say that the Instagram content has specific characteristics? Do you tend to follow this content?

13. Do you follow any instructions or tips when you upload, edit or capture a photograph? For instance, there are several tips for users available on the internet

13.1 How often do you google a question regarding Instagram use? What kind of articles have you read? Do you read news or advice pieces about Instagram?

14. Do you have any role model, on Instagram, who may inspire you? How?

15. Do you usually use filters on your photographs? Why? Are they specific ones?

16. When do you upload a photograph?

16.1 Why did you upload this picture?

16.2 When you upload a picture, do you check your profile to see the reactions of other users?

16.3 When you make a post, do you expect/hope that (lots of) people will show interest/likeness? When this doesn't happen, how do you feel?

17. How do you feel about taking photographs and uploading them on Instagram? Is something important to you?

18. Have you ever regretted posting something on Instagram?

19. Have you ever done something to upload it on Instagram? For instance, a friend of mine decided to learn how to cook so as to upload interesting pictures on Instagram.

20. What does Instagrammable mean? Do you try to have instagrammable pictures? Why?

21. Would you ever upload this picture on Instagram?

This is a picture uploaded on Instagram by a user. What do you think?

22. Do you use hashtags or tags? Why/Why not?

Stories

23. Do you upload stories? When do you upload something as a story?

24. Why do you prefer to upload a picture as a story rather than as a regular post? For instance, why did you upload this photograph?

The sociable user

25. How many followers do you have? Are they friends of yours? Why do you follow them?

26. Do you communicate with the others Instagram users? How?

26.1 Do you comment on photographs or stories? Do you usually use the predetermined Instagram responses, like stickers? If, yes, why?

27. Have you ever used the poll or the question tool (create or answer)? How? Which topics?

27.1 For what reasons do you believe that these tools, like poll, can be used?

28. Have you ever used the hashtag #likeforlike or #followforfollow? Have you ever liked a photograph of someone so as to like back yours or because he liked yours first?

29. Do you have any particular ways so as to have your followers engaged with your account or others to raise your likes?

23.1 Have you noticed which content is more appealing to users, for instance landscapes or portraits? If yes, do you try to create this kind of content?

Shopper

30. Have you ever thought or tried to advertise a brand through Instagram?

31. Have you ever interacted with a brand on Instagram? Maybe by mentioning its name or something else?

32. *Examine users' photograph if they have promoted something without having realized it (maybe without), maybe through a location stamp and ask them:*

Why did you add the location stamp in your photograph?

33. Do you participate in "give aways" or other similar contests? Why? What do you believe about these procedures of winning something?

34. Have you ever bought something you saw on Instagram?

35. Do you use the "shop section"? If yes, how?

36. Do you feel that you can discover new brands through Instagram? Do you follow brands or influencers so as to find new products? How important is Instagram for you in terms of shopping?

36.1 What do you believe about this Instagram's statement "we bring you closer to things you love"

Spectacle and recommendations / Instagram's content

37. Open your Explore page, what do you believe about the feed and the topics? Are these topics important to you? Do you spend a lot of time on these topics?

37.1 Do you believe that all users come across these (or similar) topics on Instagram?

37.2 Would you say that your feed is tailor-made for you? Your actions, behavior, demographics?

37.3 What do you believe about it?

38. How do you find new profiles to follow? Do you usually follow the recommendations that you find on the Explore page? For instance, do you follow some profiles? (algorithm)

39. There are several accounts of celebrities and influencers on Instagram. Do you follow any of them? Why?

39.1 What do you think about this picture? (an ideal picture of an influencer) How do you believe? How do you feel?

40. Do you believe that appearance is something important for Instagram?

41. Would you say that there is content that you are interested in but is absent from Instagram?

42. Which is the main use of Instagram? Do you believe that you would lose something if you had to delete your account?

43. Some people think that what users are doing on Instagram is something like labour and it should be paid. What do you think about that?

44. “The more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires” What do you think about this quote in relation to Instagram?

45. Are you going to continue using Instagram in the near/far future? Why (not)? What if it was shut down tomorrow?