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"Evolution of management control in platform organizations: a case study on the Veneto creators community on Instagram"

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ABSTRACT

The growth of social media platforms has transformed the organization of digital labour, giving rise to new forms of work that depend heavily on algorithmic systems for visibility, audience reach and economic opportunities. Within this context, content creators increasingly operate in environments where platform algorithms influence not only content distribution, but also strategic and behavioural decisions. This thesis investigates how Instagram creators perceive and experience algorithmic governance, with particular attention to algorithmic control, opacity, anxiety and behavioral responses.

The study focuses on creators belonging to the Veneto Creators Community and adopts a survey-based research design combining quantitative analysis with qualitative insights derived from open-ended responses. Data were collected from 52 Instagram creators and analysed through descriptive statistics, reliability testing, correlation analysis and exploratory group comparisons. Qualitative comments were also used to contextualize the statistical findings and provide a deeper understanding of creators' experiences.

The results indicate that creators generally perceive Instagram as exerting a significant influence over visibility and content performance. Perceived algorithmic control and algorithmic opacity emerge as the most prominent dimensions, suggesting that creators recognize both the platform's influence and the difficulty of understanding its mechanisms. Experiences of visibility reduction and perceived shadow banning are relatively widespread, while emotional responses such as frustration, stress and anxiety vary across respondents. The findings also show that creators adopt a combination of selective compliance and pragmatic adaptation strategies, including content optimization, topic avoidance and alternative visibility management techniques. Correlation analysis further reveals a strong relationship between perceived algorithmic control and algorithmic opacity, while emotional responses appear more heterogeneous.

The thesis contributes to the literature on algorithmic management, platform governance and digital labour by demonstrating how managerial functions can be exercised through algorithmic visibility systems even in the absence of formal employment relationships. The findings suggest that Instagram operates not only as a technological infrastructure

for content distribution, but also as a socio-technical environment that shapes behaviour, expectations and opportunities within the creator economy.

Keywords: algorithmic management; creator economy; Instagram; platform governance; shadow banning; digital labour.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context: from social networking to the "reels economy"

Over the past two decades, digital platforms have undergone a profound transformation, evolving from relatively simple tools for online interaction into complex socio-technical infrastructures that organize communication, economic exchange and cultural production at a global scale. Early social networking platforms were primarily designed to facilitate interpersonal connectivity, enabling users to create profiles, share content and maintain relationships within relatively stable and bounded networks. In this initial phase, participation was largely oriented toward communication and self-expression, and users were positioned primarily as members of online communities rather than as economic actors.

However, the rapid expansion of platform-based business models has progressively redefined the role of social media within contemporary economies. Platforms have evolved into powerful intermediaries that connect multiple groups of actors (like users, advertisers, content creators and third-party developers) while extracting value from the interactions that take place within their ecosystems. In this context, platforms no longer simply host user activity but actively structure and govern it, transforming participation into a key source of economic value (Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Vallas & Schor, 2020) . This transformation reflects a broader shift toward a form of capitalism in which digital infrastructures play a central role in organizing markets, coordinating activities and enabling new modes of value extraction.

A central feature of this transformation is the increasing importance of data as a strategic resource. Digital platforms systematically capture and process vast amounts of information generated through user interactions, including clicks, likes, shares, comments and viewing behavior. These data are not merely byproducts of participation but are actively transformed into valuable assets that can be analyzed, predicted and monetized. As highlighted in the literature, even seemingly trivial interactions are converted into quantifiable signals that feed into data-intensive systems, enabling platforms to continuously refine their services and optimize user engagement (Gerlitz & Helmond,

2013). In this sense, user activity becomes deeply embedded within processes of value creation, blurring the boundaries between consumption, production and labour.

This process is closely linked to the broader phenomenon of datafication, whereby social and cultural practices are transformed into structured data that can be measured, analysed and leveraged for economic purposes. Platforms do not simply record user behavior but actively shape it, encouraging forms of interaction that generate data and can be easily quantified. As a result, participation itself becomes a productive activity, contributing to the continuous generation of value within platform ecosystems (van Dijck et al., 2018) . This transformation challenges traditional distinctions between work and leisure, as activities that appear voluntary and recreational simultaneously contribute to economic processes.

Within this evolving landscape, social media platforms (particularly Instagram) have undergone a further transformation with the rise of algorithmic recommendation systems and the increasing centrality of short-form video content. The introduction of formats such as Reels represents a significant shift toward an attention-driven economy, in which the primary objective is to capture and retain user attention. In this context, content is no longer distributed primarily through social networks or chronological feeds, but through algorithmic systems that prioritize content based on predicted engagement and relevance.

This transition fundamentally alters the dynamics of visibility. In earlier phases of social media, visibility was largely determined by network structures, such as the number of followers or the strength of social ties. In contrast, in contemporary platform environments, visibility is increasingly mediated by algorithmic processes that evaluate content based on performance metrics and user behavior. As a result, access to audiences is no longer guaranteed by network position alone but depends on the ability to produce content that aligns with platform-defined criteria.

This transformation has given rise to what is commonly described as the creator economy, in which individuals engage in content production as a form of economic activity. Creators operate at the intersection of social interaction and market participation, producing content that is simultaneously expressive and instrumental. On the one hand, content creation remains tied to identity, creativity and self-expression; on the other hand,

it is increasingly oriented toward visibility, engagement and monetization. In this context, creators occupy a hybrid position between users and workers, navigating a space in which participation is both voluntary and economically significant.

However, this form of labour is characterized by significant levels of uncertainty and precarity. Unlike traditional employment relationships, which provide relatively stable conditions and clear forms of compensation, platform-based labour is mediated by systems that are dynamic, competitive and largely beyond the control of individual users. As highlighted in the literature, creative work within digital platforms often involves substantial amounts of unpaid or underpaid labour, with the promise of future rewards rather than guaranteed outcomes (Duffy, 2017; Cunningham & Craig, 2019). This creates a situation in which creators must continuously invest time, effort and resources without certainty of success.

A defining feature of this environment is the centrality of visibility as a scarce and unevenly distributed resource. In highly saturated content ecosystems, attention becomes a key determinant of value, and competition for visibility intensifies. Creators must therefore engage in continuous processes of optimization, adjusting their practices in order to align with platform dynamics. Metrics such as likes, views, shares and watch time become critical indicators of performance, shaping both content production and user behavior.

At the same time, the mechanisms that regulate visibility are embedded within algorithmic systems that are complex, dynamic and only partially transparent. This introduces a fundamental asymmetry between platforms and users. While platforms maintain control over the infrastructures that determine visibility and value, users have limited access to the information necessary to fully understand or predict how these systems operate. As a result, participation within platform environments is characterized by a combination of opportunity and constraint, where access to audiences is both enabled and controlled by the platform.

This shift has significant implications for how control is exercised in digital environments. In traditional organizational contexts, control is typically associated with hierarchical structures, formal rules and direct supervision. In contrast, within platform-

based systems, control is increasingly embedded within algorithmic infrastructures that operate continuously and at scale. These systems regulate behavior not only through explicit rules, such as community guidelines, but also through the distribution of visibility and attention, influencing what content is seen, by whom, and under what conditions.

Crucially, control becomes less visible but more pervasive. Rather than being imposed through direct commands or sanctions, it operates through the structuring of environments in which users act. Platforms shape behavior by defining the conditions under which success is possible, guiding users toward practices that align with platform objectives. This form of control is particularly powerful because it is embedded within the architecture of the system itself, making it difficult to observe, challenge or resist.

The transition from social networking to the "reels economy" can therefore be understood as a shift from interaction-based participation to algorithmically mediated performance, where users are continuously evaluated based on their ability to generate engagement and visibility. Participation becomes a form of performance that is structured around metrics and optimized for algorithmic recognition, transforming the nature of user activity and redefining the relationship between platforms and users.

These dynamics highlight how visibility, value, and control are deeply intertwined within platform environments. However, while platforms strongly incentivize creators to pursue visibility and engagement, the mechanisms through which these outcomes are produced remain only partially transparent. This tension constitutes a central problem within the contemporary creator economy and is examined in the following section.

1.2 Problem statement: the pursuit of "virality" vs. opaque guidelines

The transformation of social media into an attention-driven and creator-oriented economy has fundamentally reshaped the conditions under which visibility, success and value are produced. As discussed in the previous section, platforms such as Instagram operate through algorithmic systems that prioritize content based on engagement and predicted

user interest. Within this environment, content creators are not only participants in social interaction but are increasingly positioned as actors engaged in the continuous production of content under conditions of competition, evaluation and uncertainty (Cunningham & Craig, 2019) .

At the core of this transformation lies the growing centrality of visibility as a key resource. In platform-based environments characterized by an abundance of content and limited user attention, visibility becomes both scarce and highly valuable. Access to audiences is no longer guaranteed by social connections alone but is mediated by algorithmic systems that determine which content is amplified and which remains marginal. As a result, creators are compelled to engage in practices aimed at maximizing their exposure, transforming content production into a strategic activity oriented toward performance (Vallas & Schor, 2020) .

Within this context, the pursuit of virality emerges as a dominant organizing principle of platform participation. Virality refers to the rapid and widespread dissemination of content, typically driven by high levels of engagement such as likes, shares, comments and watch time. Achieving virality significantly increases the likelihood that content will be promoted by algorithmic systems, enabling creators to reach audiences beyond their immediate network. For many creators, virality represents a critical pathway to growth, recognition and monetization, making it a central objective of their activity (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Duffy, 2017) .

However, virality is not simply an outcome but a structural imperative embedded within the design of platform systems. Algorithmic recommendation models are optimized to prioritize content that captures and retains user attention, creating a feedback loop in which high-performing content is further amplified. This dynamic encourages creators to continuously optimize their content in order to align with the criteria that drive algorithmic visibility. As a result, content production becomes increasingly shaped by platform logics, with creators adapting their practices to maximize engagement and performance (Kenney & Zysman, 2016) .

Despite the centrality of virality, the mechanisms that govern visibility remain largely opaque and difficult to interpret. Platforms provide formal guidelines that outline

acceptable content and behavior, but these guidelines do not fully explain how visibility is determined. Algorithmic systems operate through complex and dynamic processes that are not fully disclosed to users, making it difficult to establish clear relationships between actions and outcomes. This creates a situation in which creators are required to perform effectively within systems whose underlying logic is only partially accessible (Pasquale, 2015; Burrell, 2016) .

This condition gives rise to a fundamental tension between incentive and knowledge. On the one hand, platforms strongly incentivize creators to optimize their content for maximum reach and engagement. On the other hand, they provide limited transparency regarding the criteria used to evaluate and distribute content. Creators are therefore encouraged to pursue virality while lacking the information necessary to reliably achieve it. This tension is not merely a technical issue but a structural feature of platform governance, shaping how users interact with and adapt to the system (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2018) .

From a management control perspective, this dynamic can be understood as a form of asymmetrical information environment, in which platforms possess extensive knowledge about user behavior, algorithmic processes and performance metrics, while users have only partial insight into these systems. This asymmetry enables platforms to maintain control over the distribution of visibility and value, while limiting the ability of users to predict or challenge outcomes.

The implications of this asymmetry are particularly significant for content creators, whose success depends directly on algorithmically mediated visibility. In the absence of clear and stable rules, creators must engage in continuous processes of interpretation, experimentation and adaptation. They attempt to infer the logic of the platform by analyzing patterns in engagement, testing different strategies and adjusting their practices in response to perceived signals. This process transforms content creation into an ongoing strategic activity, where success depends not only on creativity but also on the ability to navigate uncertain and evolving systems (Duffy & Meisner, 2022) .

At the same time, the opacity of platform governance introduces a dimension of risk and unpredictability that significantly affects user experience. Changes in algorithmic models,

shifts in platform priorities or variations in content evaluation criteria can lead to sudden fluctuations in visibility. These changes are often not communicated explicitly, leaving creators uncertain about the causes of performance variations. As a result, participation within platform environments is characterized by a high degree of volatility, where outcomes are difficult to predict and stability is difficult to maintain (Vallas & Schor, 2020) .

This uncertainty is closely linked to the emergence of precarity within the creator economy. Unlike traditional forms of work, where performance is evaluated according to relatively stable criteria, platform-based participation is subject to continuous and opaque evaluation. Creators must constantly adapt to changing conditions, investing time and effort without guarantees of success. This creates a situation in which individuals are exposed to both opportunities for rapid growth and risks of sudden decline, reinforcing the unstable nature of platform-based labour (Duffy, 2017; Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

Furthermore, the pursuit of virality under conditions of opacity contributes to the intensification of behavioral control through algorithmic evaluation. As discussed in Chapter 2, platforms regulate user behavior not only through explicit rules but also through the distribution of visibility and attention. Creators are continuously evaluated based on their ability to generate engagement and these evaluations directly influence their access to audiences. This creates a form of indirect control, where users are guided toward certain behaviors without explicit instruction, aligning their practices with platform objectives in order to achieve visibility (Kellogg et al., 2020; Azevedo et al., 2023) .

In this context, creators are encouraged to internalize platform logics, adjusting their behavior in anticipation of algorithmic evaluation. This process leads to forms of self-regulation, where users modify their content strategies, posting habits and creative choices in response to perceived platform expectations. Over time, this contributes to the standardization of content and the diffusion of platform-specific norms, as creators converge toward practices that are believed to maximize visibility (Abidin, 2016; Cameron et al., 2025) .

At the same time, the gap between platform governance and user understanding gives rise to phenomena such as perceived invisibility, declining reach and unexplained fluctuations in engagement. Creators often interpret these outcomes as signals of algorithmic intervention, even when no explicit explanation is provided. This highlights the limitations of user knowledge and the challenges of navigating systems that are both influential and opaque (Cotter, 2023) .

The tension between the pursuit of virality and the opacity of platform systems therefore represents a central problem within the contemporary creator economy. On the one hand, platforms encourage creators to engage in performance-oriented practices aimed at maximizing visibility. On the other hand, they restrict access to the information necessary to fully understand how visibility is produced and distributed. This dual dynamic creates a condition in which creators are simultaneously empowered and constrained, operating within environments that offer opportunities for growth while maintaining strong forms of control.

Understanding this tension is essential for analyzing how management control operates within platform-based environments. It highlights how control is exercised not only through explicit rules but also through the structuring of incentives, the distribution of visibility and the management of information asymmetries. Moreover, it underscores the importance of examining how users perceive and respond to these dynamics, as their interpretations play a crucial role in shaping behavior and sustaining platform systems.

For these reasons, this thesis seeks to investigate how content creators experience and interpret algorithmic control within Instagram, with particular attention to issues of visibility, opacity and perceived forms of hidden regulation such as shadow banning. By focusing on the perspective of creators operating within a specific local context, the Veneto Creators Community, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how platform governance is enacted, experienced and negotiated at the micro level. These dynamics point to the need for a deeper investigation into how algorithmic control is experienced and interpreted by users. In particular, they raise questions about how creators make sense of visibility, respond to opacity, and navigate perceived forms of

hidden regulation. These issues are addressed through the research questions outlined in the following section.

1.3 Research questions (focus on visibility and shadow banning)

The transformation of social media into a data-driven and attention-oriented environment, combined with the structural tension between the pursuit of virality and the opacity of platform systems, raises fundamental questions regarding how control operates within digital platforms and how it is experienced by users. As discussed in the previous sections, platforms such as Instagram do not simply facilitate interaction but actively structure participation through algorithmic systems that regulate visibility, prioritize content and shape user behavior. At the same time, these systems remain only partially transparent, creating conditions of uncertainty and asymmetry that significantly affect content creators and their ability to navigate the platform environment.

In this thesis, platform governance is conceptualized as a form of asymmetrical hybrid control, in which formal rules coexist with opaque algorithmic systems, but where the power to define visibility and success remains concentrated within the platform.

Within this context, understanding platform governance requires moving beyond a purely structural or technical perspective and examining how control is perceived, interpreted and enacted at the user level. Algorithmic systems do not operate in isolation, their effects are mediated by users' interpretations, expectations and everyday practices. Content creators, in particular, occupy a central position within this dynamic, as their visibility, engagement and potential for monetization depend directly on how their content is evaluated and distributed by algorithmic systems (van Dijck et al., 2018) .

A key challenge in this environment is the presence of information asymmetry, whereby platforms retain extensive knowledge about algorithmic processes, data flows and performance metrics, while users have only limited access to this information. This asymmetry constrains users' ability to fully understand how visibility is produced and to

anticipate the consequences of their actions. As a result, creators are required to operate under conditions of uncertainty, relying on indirect signals such as engagement metrics, reach fluctuations and audience feedback to guide their strategies (Pasquale, 2015; Burrell, 2016) .

In response to this opacity, users engage in processes of interpretative sensemaking, constructing informal and experience-based understandings of how platform systems operate. These processes, conceptualized as algorithmic imaginaries, allow creators to navigate uncertain environments by providing frameworks through which they interpret patterns of visibility, engagement and growth (Duffy & Meisner, 2022). Through experimentation, observation and interaction with other creators, users develop shared narratives about what drives success on the platform. However, these imaginaries remain inherently partial and unstable, reflecting both the evolving nature of algorithmic systems and the limits of user knowledge.

At the same time, the gap between platform governance and user understanding gives rise to perceptions of inconsistency, unpredictability and potential unfairness. Creators frequently report experiences such as sudden drops in reach, reduced engagement or difficulties in accessing new audiences, often without clear explanation. Within this context, the notion of shadow banning has emerged as a key interpretative framework, used by users to describe situations in which content appears to be systematically deprioritized or rendered less visible without explicit notification or justification (Cotter, 2023) .

The relevance of shadow banning extends beyond its empirical verification to its role as a perceived form of control and uncertainty management. Whether or not such practices are formally acknowledged by platforms, the belief that visibility can be restricted without transparency has significant implications for user behavior. It contributes to a sense of vulnerability and instability, as creators attempt to navigate systems that may affect their performance in ways that are not fully observable or predictable. This perception can influence not only content strategies but also the psychological experience of platform participation, including feelings of frustration, anxiety and loss of control.

From a management control perspective, these dynamics highlight the importance of examining not only the mechanisms through which control is exercised but also the ways in which it is internalized, reproduced and potentially contested by users. As discussed in Chapter 2, platform governance operates through a combination of formal rules and algorithmic systems, resulting in a form of asymmetrical hybrid governance that structures both behavior and outcomes. At the user level, this translates into processes of adaptation, self-regulation and strategic alignment, as creators modify their practices in response to perceived platform expectations (Kellogg et al., 2020; Azevedo et al., 2023).

At the same time, users are not entirely passive subjects of control. The interpretative processes through which they make sense of platform dynamics also open space for agency, negotiation and potential resistance. Creators may experiment with alternative strategies, challenge dominant narratives about the algorithm or develop collective practices aimed at sharing knowledge and mitigating uncertainty. This highlights the need to consider not only compliance with platform logics but also the diversity of responses that emerge in practice.

These considerations point to the importance of an empirical investigation that captures the lived experience of platform governance, focusing on how creators interpret, negotiate and respond to algorithmic control in their everyday activities. In particular, this thesis adopts a localized perspective by examining the Veneto Creators Community, a group of content creators operating within a specific geographical and cultural context. This focus allows for a more nuanced understanding of how global platform dynamics are experienced at the micro level, taking into account both individual perceptions and collective practices.

Based on these premises, the study is guided by the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ1: How do Veneto-based content creators perceive and interpret algorithmic control within Instagram, particularly in relation to visibility and content distribution?
- RQ2: How is the phenomenon of shadow banning perceived by creators and what effects does it have on their behavior, content strategies and psychological wellbeing?

- RQ3: How do creators respond to algorithmic opacity? Do they primarily comply with perceived platform logics or do they develop forms of resistance and alternative strategies?

These research questions aim to bridge the gap between macro-level analyses of platform governance and micro-level user experiences. While existing literature has extensively examined the structural dynamics of platform economies and algorithmic control, less attention has been paid to how these dynamics are interpreted, negotiated and experienced by users in specific contexts (Vallas & Schor, 2020; Duffy & Meisner, 2022) .

Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how management control operates within platform-based environments by integrating structural, technological, and experiential perspectives. By focusing on issues of visibility, opacity, and perceived forms of hidden regulation, the study highlights the complex interplay between platform governance and user agency. In doing so, it not only examines how control is exercised through algorithmic systems but also how it is interpreted, internalized, and negotiated by users in their everyday practices. This perspective provides the foundation for the empirical analysis that follows, in which these dynamics are explored through the experiences of the Veneto Creators Community.

1.4 Thesis structure

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research context, focusing on the transformation of Instagram from a social networking platform into an algorithmically mediated environment where visibility, engagement and creator labour are increasingly structured by platform systems. It also presents the problem statement and the research questions guiding the study.

Chapter 2 develops the theoretical framework of the thesis. It reviews the literature on algorithmic management, platform governance and digital labour, with particular attention to algorithmic control, opacity, visibility labour, algorithmic imaginaries and

shadow banning. This chapter provides the conceptual basis for understanding Instagram as a hybrid governance system in which formal rules and algorithmic mechanisms jointly shape creator activity.

Chapter 3 explains the methodological approach adopted in the study. It presents the survey design the quantitative survey design, the choice of Instagram and the Veneto Creators Community as the empirical context, the data collection strategy and the operationalization of the main variables: perceived algorithmic control, algorithmic opacity, algorithmic anxiety, behavioral compliance and behavioral resistance/adaptation.

Chapter 4 presents and analyses the empirical findings. It first describes the sample profile and then examines creators' perceptions of algorithmic control, experiences of opacity and visibility disruption, psychological responses to platform dynamics and behavioral responses to algorithmic governance. The chapter also includes descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, exploratory group comparisons and qualitative insights from open-ended responses.

Chapter 5 concludes the thesis by discussing whether Instagram can be understood as a de facto managerial actor within the creator economy. It reflects on the theoretical and practical implications of the findings, acknowledges the limitations of the study and suggests directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 The evolution of control: algorithmic management in social media

The transformation of digital platforms has not only reshaped economic and social interactions but has also profoundly altered the nature of management control. Traditionally, management control systems were grounded in hierarchical and bureaucratic structures, where authority was exercised through formal rules, direct supervision and clearly defined organizational roles. In these models, managers were responsible for monitoring performance, allocating tasks and enforcing compliance, relying on a combination of formal procedures and interpersonal oversight. However, the rise of digital platforms has challenged these conventional forms of control, introducing new mechanisms that are increasingly mediated by technology.

A key shift in this evolution is the transition from human-centered control to technology-mediated control, in which digital systems progressively augment and replace traditional managerial functions. Control is no longer exercised exclusively through hierarchical authority but becomes embedded within technological infrastructures that operate continuously and at scale, enabling organizations to coordinate activities without direct human intervention (Wiener et al., 2023)

This transformation has led to the emergence of algorithmic management, defined as a system in which algorithms perform core managerial tasks such as task allocation, performance evaluation and decision-making. In digital environments, these systems organize work processes through continuous data collection and automated decision-making, fundamentally reshaping how control is exercised (Azevedo et al., 2023). Algorithmic management operates as an “always-on” mechanism, constantly monitoring behavior and adjusting outputs in real time, thereby increasing both the intensity and scope of control (Zhang et al., 2025).

The implications of this shift are particularly evident in platform-based environments, where control is exercised through data collection, metrics and automated decision-making. Unlike traditional systems, which rely on periodic evaluations and human judgment, algorithmic control operates continuously, collecting vast amounts of data on

user behavior and translating them into performance indicators. These indicators are then used to guide decision-making processes, often without direct human intervention. As a result, control becomes more pervasive, granular and scalable.

A central feature of algorithmic management is its reliance on evaluative infrastructures, which generate and circulate metrics that shape behavior and define performance. These infrastructures transform complex activities into quantifiable indicators, enabling comparison, ranking and standardization across users. In platform environments, such infrastructures take the form of engagement metrics, ratings, rankings and visibility scores, which function as proxies for performance and guide user behavior toward platform-defined objectives (Kornberger et al., 2017).

At the same time, algorithmic management introduces new forms of information asymmetry. Platforms retain access to detailed data and the logic governing algorithmic decision-making, while users have only partial visibility into how these systems operate. This asymmetry limits users' ability to understand, predict or challenge outcomes, reinforcing the power of platform operators and creating conditions of dependency (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016).

Algorithmic control also reshapes the relationship between control and autonomy. While digital platforms often present themselves as flexible and decentralized environments, control is exercised through indirect mechanisms embedded in technological systems. These include performance metrics, automated feedback loops and incentive structures that guide behavior without requiring direct supervision. As a result, users are encouraged to self-regulate, aligning their actions with platform logics in order to achieve desired outcomes (Kellogg et al., 2020) .

Another important aspect of this transformation is the increasing automation and depersonalization of managerial functions. Decision-making processes that were traditionally based on human judgment are now executed through algorithms, reducing the role of interpersonal interaction and emphasizing efficiency and standardization. Individuals are evaluated primarily through quantitative indicators, which can reduce complex behaviors to simplified metrics and limit contextual interpretation (Wiener et al., 2023)

Furthermore, algorithmic control is characterized by its continuous and often invisible nature. Unlike traditional management systems, where control mechanisms are often explicit and observable, algorithmic control operates in the background, embedded within the architecture of digital platforms. Users may not always be aware of how their behavior is being monitored or evaluated, yet their actions are constantly shaped by the incentives and constraints imposed by the system. This form of control is both subtle and powerful, as it influences behavior without requiring direct intervention (Zhang et al., 2025).

In the context of social media, these dynamics are particularly significant. Platforms such as Instagram rely on algorithmic systems to determine content visibility, prioritize information and shape user engagement. Content creators, therefore, operate within environments where their performance is continuously evaluated through metrics such as views, likes and engagement rates. These metrics function as tools of control, guiding creators' behavior and influencing their content production strategies.

Importantly, the shift from hierarchical to algorithmic control does not imply the disappearance of control, but rather its transformation. Control becomes distributed, data-driven and embedded in technological systems, operating through indirect mechanisms such as incentives, rankings, and feedback loops. As a result, users are encouraged to self-regulate, aligning their behavior with platform logics in order to achieve desired outcomes such as visibility and monetization.

In sum, the evolution of management control from traditional hierarchical models to algorithmic systems represents a fundamental shift in how organizations coordinate and govern behavior. Digital platforms exemplify this transformation, as they rely on algorithmic infrastructures to manage large-scale interactions and to shape user activity. Understanding this evolution is essential for analyzing contemporary platform environments, where control is no longer exercised solely by human managers but is increasingly embedded in automated, data-driven systems that redefine the boundaries between organization, technology, and user agency (Kellogg et al., 2020; Wiener et al., 2023).

2.2 Instagram's hybrid governance

The evolution of management control discussed in the previous section highlights a fundamental shift from hierarchical, human-centered forms of coordination toward data-driven and algorithmic systems embedded within digital infrastructures. However, this transformation should not be interpreted as a simple substitution of traditional control mechanisms with technological ones. Instead, contemporary platforms operate through a reconfiguration of control, in which different logics coexist and interact within the same organizational environment. More specifically, platform governance emerges as a layered and hybrid system, where elements of bureaucratic regulation are combined with algorithmic processes that structure behavior in more indirect and pervasive ways (Wiener et al., 2023; Kellogg et al., 2020) .

This hybridization reflects a broader transformation in how control is exercised in digital contexts. Traditional bureaucratic systems rely on formal rules, explicit procedures, and clearly identifiable authority structures, making control visible and, at least in principle, understandable to those subject to it. In contrast, algorithmic systems operate through continuous data processing, automated decision-making, and probabilistic models that are often opaque to users. These systems do not simply enforce rules but actively shape the environment in which actions take place, influencing behavior through incentives, rankings, and feedback loops rather than through direct commands (Azevedo et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2025) .

Social media platforms represent a particularly relevant context in which to observe this transformation, as they integrate both dimensions of control within a single system. Instagram, in particular, can be understood as a paradigmatic example of hybrid governance, where formalized rule structures coexist with algorithmic infrastructures that regulate visibility and engagement. On the one hand, the platform establishes explicit boundaries of acceptable behavior through community guidelines, content policies, and enforcement mechanisms. On the other hand, it relies on recommendation algorithms and ranking systems that determine which content is seen, by whom, and under what conditions. These two dimensions are not independent but deeply interconnected, as

algorithmic systems operate within the boundaries defined by formal rules while simultaneously shaping the practical experience of those rules.

This dual structure fundamentally redefines the nature of management control. Control is no longer exercised solely through direct supervision or rule enforcement but is increasingly embedded in the architecture of the platform itself. Users are governed not only by what they are explicitly allowed or forbidden to do, but also by how visibility, attention, and opportunities are distributed within the system. In this sense, control becomes both explicit and implicit, combining visible forms of regulation with more subtle mechanisms that guide behavior through the structuring of incentives and possibilities.

At the same time, this hybrid model introduces new forms of opacity and asymmetry. While formal rules are publicly available and relatively stable, the algorithmic processes that shape visibility are complex, dynamic, and only partially accessible to users. This creates a condition in which users are aware of being governed but lack full understanding of how governance operates in practice. As a result, navigating the platform requires continuous interpretation, adaptation, and experimentation, reinforcing the central role of algorithmic systems in shaping user behavior.

Understanding Instagram's governance therefore requires moving beyond a purely technical or purely organizational perspective, and instead adopting an integrated approach that considers both the mechanisms of visibility and the broader implications for control. For this reason, the following sections are structured in two complementary parts. The first examines the functioning of recommendation systems and the logic through which visibility is algorithmically produced. The second explores how the interaction between bureaucratic rules and algorithmic processes gives rise to a hybrid form of governance that reconfigures control in platform-based environments.

2.2.1 The algorithm: recommendation systems and the logic of visibility

Within Instagram's governance structure, algorithmic systems play a central role in determining how content is distributed, ranked and made visible to users. These systems operate as the primary mechanism through which attention is allocated, transforming visibility into a function of data-driven evaluation rather than social connection alone More specifically, the platform's recommendation architecture represents a key site of control, where user behavior is continuously monitored, interpreted and shaped through algorithmic processes.

At the core of this system are recommendation algorithms designed to predict and optimize user engagement. These systems rely on a wide range of behavioral signals, including likes, comments, shares, saves, watch time and interaction history. By processing these inputs through machine learning models, platforms are able to estimate the likelihood that a given piece of content will capture a user's attention. The objective is not merely to present relevant content, but to maximize engagement and retention by continuously adapting recommendations to user behavior (Covington et al., 2016).

This logic is particularly evident in features such as the Explore page, which functions as a discovery mechanism based on predicted user interest rather than existing social connections. Unlike the traditional feed, which historically relied on follower networks, the Explore page exposes users to content from accounts they do not follow, selecting posts based on engagement patterns and behavioral similarities. In this context, visibility is determined by the algorithm's assessment of relevance and performance, rather than by pre-existing relationships, reinforcing a shift toward algorithmically mediated discovery.

More broadly, this system reflects a transition toward personalized and predictive content distribution, where each user is exposed to a curated stream of content tailored to their preferences and past interactions. As a result, visibility becomes dynamic and individualized, shaped by continuous feedback loops between user behavior and algorithmic evaluation. Content can therefore reach large and previously inaccessible audiences, but only if it satisfies the performance criteria embedded within the system.

These criteria are largely based on engagement metrics, which function as proxies for content quality and relevance. High levels of interaction (such as prolonged watch time,

repeated views or frequent sharing) signal to the algorithm that content is valuable, increasing its likelihood of being promoted. This creates a feedback mechanism in which visibility and engagement reinforce each other: content that performs well is amplified, while content that does not meet performance thresholds remains marginal. In this way, the algorithm establishes a performance-based hierarchy of visibility, where success is contingent upon measurable user responses.

However, the functioning of these systems is characterized by a high degree of opacity and complexity. While users can observe outcomes (such as fluctuations in reach or engagement), they do not have access to the internal logic that determines these outcomes. Algorithmic systems operate as "black boxes," where the processes connecting inputs and outputs are not fully transparent or explainable (Pasquale, 2015; Burrell, 2016). This opacity is reinforced both by the technical complexity of machine learning models and by institutional incentives to limit external scrutiny, making it difficult for users to fully understand or predict how visibility is generated.

The operation of recommendation systems can also be understood in terms of algorithmic power, which functions through conditional visibility rather than direct command. Visibility is not equally distributed but depends on the alignment of content with platform-defined criteria, creating an "if…then" logic in which certain behaviors are rewarded while others are penalized. In this sense, algorithms do not simply organize content but actively structure the conditions under which visibility becomes possible, shaping what is seen and what remains invisible (Bucher, 2018).

Beyond their technical role, algorithms therefore act as mechanisms of behavioral governance. By selectively amplifying certain types of content and limiting the visibility of others, platforms indirectly shape user behavior and influence content production. Control is exercised not through explicit instructions but through the structuring of incentives and opportunities, encouraging users to adapt their practices in response to algorithmic signals. This form of governance operates at a systemic level, guiding aggregate behavior rather than directly controlling individual actions (Xiang, 2022).

For content creators, this system translates into a continuous process of strategic adaptation and optimization. Visibility becomes a function of performance, pushing

creators to prioritize formats, styles and topics that are more likely to generate engagement. As a result, content production is increasingly oriented toward metrics, with creators monitoring performance indicators and adjusting their strategies accordingly. This dynamic contributes to the standardization of content and the diffusion of platform-specific trends, as users converge toward what is perceived to be "algorithmically successful."

At the same time, the probabilistic and dynamic nature of algorithmic systems introduces a dimension of uncertainty and instability. Because these systems are continuously updated and responsive to changing data, their behavior is not fixed but evolving. Strategies that are effective at one moment may quickly become obsolete, requiring ongoing experimentation and adaptation. This instability reinforces the dependence of creators on the platform, as success is contingent upon navigating a system that is only partially knowable.

The combination of performance-based evaluation, opacity and uncertainty produces a distinctive environment in which creators operate. Visibility becomes both the primary objective and a highly contingent outcome, dependent on factors that are difficult to fully access or control. As a result, creators are positioned within a system that simultaneously offers opportunities for wide reach and imposes constraints through opaque and evolving criteria.

Ultimately, Instagram's recommendation algorithm represents a central mechanism through which control is exercised within the platform. By transforming user activity into data, translating this data into performance metrics and using these metrics to allocate visibility, the platform establishes a system in which behavior is continuously monitored, evaluated and shaped. This system does not replace traditional forms of control but operates alongside them, contributing to a broader hybrid governance structure. The implications of this interaction between algorithmic and bureaucratic mechanisms are explored in the following section, where attention shifts to the reconfiguration of control within platform environments.

2.2.2 Hybrid governance and the reconfiguration of control

The analysis of Instagram's recommendation systems highlights how visibility is algorithmically produced and distributed through data-driven processes. However, these mechanisms do not operate in isolation. Rather, they are embedded within a broader governance framework that combines formal rule-based regulation with algorithmic evaluation, resulting in a hybrid configuration of control. Understanding this interaction is essential for grasping how management control is redefined in platform environments.

Instagram's governance can be conceptualized as a dual system, in which bureaucratic and algorithmic mechanisms operate simultaneously and in a mutually reinforcing manner. On the one hand, the platform establishes explicit rules through community guidelines, terms of service and content policies that define the boundaries of acceptable behavior. These mechanisms resemble traditional bureaucratic control, relying on codified norms, standardized procedures and formal enforcement actions such as content removal, account restrictions or suspension (Gillespie, 2018). On the other hand, algorithmic systems regulate the distribution of visibility, determining which content is amplified, which remains marginal and which effectively disappears from user feeds.

This combination produces a layered and asymmetrical form of governance, in which platforms simultaneously define the limits of participation and control the conditions under which visibility and success are distributed. Compliance with formal rules is necessary to remain within the platform, but it is not sufficient to achieve visibility or recognition. Instead, success depends on alignment with algorithmic criteria that remain only partially accessible to users. This distinction shifts the locus of control from merely regulating behavior to actively shaping outcomes.

From a management control perspective, this hybrid configuration represents not simply a transformation but an intensification of control, as governance becomes embedded within the infrastructural and computational logic of the platform. Traditional forms of control rely on direct supervision, explicit rules and identifiable authority, making power visible and, at least in principle, contestable. In contrast, platform-based control operates through the design of systems that structure action and interaction, guiding behavior without requiring direct intervention.

A key feature of this transformation is the increasing centrality of evaluative processes. While bureaucratic systems classify behavior in terms of compliance or violation, algorithmic systems continuously evaluate performance through metrics such as engagement, reach and retention. These metrics function as implicit criteria for success, shaping user behavior through ongoing feedback loops rather than discrete assessments (Kornberger et al., 2017). As a result, control becomes continuous, data-driven and embedded in everyday interactions.

At the same time, the interaction between bureaucratic and algorithmic mechanisms generates a condition of structured opacity. Formal rules are publicly available and relatively stable, providing users with a sense of clarity regarding what is permitted or prohibited. However, the algorithmic processes that determine visibility are complex, dynamic and largely inaccessible. This creates a gap between what users know about the system and how the system operates in practice, reinforcing uncertainty and limiting the ability to anticipate outcomes (Ananny & Crawford, 2018; Pasquale, 2015).

This opacity reinforces power asymmetries between platforms and users. Platforms retain control over both the rule system and the algorithmic infrastructure, while users have limited capacity to interpret or challenge decisions. The coexistence of formal transparency and operational opacity allows platforms to maintain legitimacy while preserving flexibility and control. In this sense, governance becomes both visible and hidden, combining explicit regulation with implicit forms of influence (Bucher, 2018).

Moreover, this hybrid model produces a form of behavioral alignment without direct coercion. Users are not explicitly instructed on how to behave, but are incentivized to adapt their actions in response to the distribution of visibility. By amplifying certain types of content and limiting others, the platform guides users toward behaviors that align with its objectives, such as maximizing engagement and retention. This indirect form of control operates through the modulation of attention, shaping behavior by structuring opportunities rather than imposing rules.

This dynamic also generates a condition of constrained autonomy. While users appear to have significant freedom in how they create and share content, their ability to achieve visibility is shaped by algorithmic systems that define the conditions of success.

Autonomy is therefore not eliminated but reconfigured, existing within boundaries that are continuously adjusted by the platform. Users are free to act, but not equally able to succeed.

The interaction between bureaucratic and algorithmic control further introduces uncertainty and instability. While formal rules provide a relatively stable framework, algorithmic systems are dynamic and constantly evolving. Changes in recommendation models or engagement thresholds can significantly affect visibility, often without clear communication to users. This instability requires continuous adaptation, reinforcing dependence on the platform and intensifying the need for strategic alignment.

Ultimately, Instagram's governance system illustrates a broader transformation in the nature of management control within platform environments. Control is no longer centralized, visible or exclusively human-driven, but is instead embedded within socio-technical infrastructures that operate continuously and at scale. By combining bureaucratic regulation with opaque algorithmic processes, platforms establish a form of governance that is both pervasive and asymmetrical, shaping behavior while limiting users' ability to fully understand or contest its mechanisms. More specifically, control becomes not only a matter of regulation, but of structuring the very conditions under which participation, visibility and success are made possible.

This reconfiguration of control shifts attention from formal mechanisms to lived experience. While governance is embedded in the system, its effects are mediated by how users perceive, interpret and respond to it. Understanding these subjective dimensions is therefore essential for capturing the full complexity of platform-based control, and becomes particularly relevant in relation to phenomena such as perceived invisibility, algorithmic uncertainty and shadow banning, which will be explored in the following section.

To further clarify the relationship between bureaucratic and algorithmic forms of control, table 1 summarizes their key differences and points of overlap within the Instagram environment.

Table 1: Bureaucratic and algorithmic control: similarities and differences

Dimension	Bureaucratic Control	Algorithmic Control
Nature of control	Formal, rule-based governance grounded in explicit policies	Informal, data-driven governance embedded in algorithmic systems
Source of authority	Platform-defined rules (e.g., community guidelines, account policies)	Computational models based on user data and behavioral prediction
Transparency	Relatively high: rules are codified and publicly accessible	Low: decision-making processes are opaque and not fully disclosed
Mode of operation	Discrete and episodic (triggered by rule violations)	Continuous and real-time (embedded in content ranking and distribution)
Mechanism of enforcement	Content removal, warnings, account suspension, "account status" tools	Ranking, filtering, amplification or suppression of content visibility
Feedback to users	Direct and explicit (notifications, sanctions, visible penalties)	Indirect and implicit (changes in reach, engagement, discoverability)
User awareness	High: users are aware of rules and potential violations	Limited: users infer system behavior through experience and outcomes
Temporal logic	Reactive (intervenes after a violation occurs)	Proactive and predictive (anticipates and shapes behavior in advance)
Form of compliance	Rule adherence (avoiding violations)	Behavioral optimization (adapting to perceived algorithmic preferences)
Impact on creators	Risk of sanctions and content removal	Fluctuating visibility, performance pressure, and dependency on metrics
Type of control	Explicit and visible	Implicit, subtle and pervasive
Underlying rationale	Legal-rational and policy-driven governance	Efficiency-oriented, engagement-maximizing, data-driven logic

This comparison illustrates that control on Instagram operates through a hybrid configuration in which formalized rules define the boundaries of acceptable behavior,

while algorithmic systems continuously regulate visibility and performance, thereby shaping user practices in more subtle and pervasive ways.

2.3 The user perspective

The hybrid governance structure outlined in the previous sections highlights how control within platform environments is embedded in both formal rules and algorithmic infrastructures. However, understanding how control operates in practice requires moving beyond its structural and technical dimensions and examining how it is experienced, interpreted, and negotiated by users themselves. Algorithmic systems do not operate in a social vacuum; their effects are mediated by users' perceptions, beliefs and everyday practices (Bucher, 2018; Duffy & Meisner, 2022).

In the context of social media platforms such as Instagram, content creators occupy a particularly relevant position within this dynamic. As actors whose visibility, engagement and economic opportunities depend directly on algorithmic processes, they are continuously exposed to the effects of platform governance. At the same time, they are required to navigate systems that are only partially transparent, relying on indirect signals and outcomes rather than explicit rules. This condition gives rise to a form of interpretative engagement, in which users actively attempt to make sense of how the platform operates (Bucher, 2018; Duffy & Meisner, 2022).

A key concept for understanding this process is that of algorithmic imaginaries, which refers to the ways in which users construct mental models of algorithmic systems based on observation, experience and shared knowledge. In the absence of full transparency, creators develop informal theories about how visibility is generated, often relying on trial-and-error, community discussions and circulating best practices. These imaginaries play a crucial role in shaping behavior, as they guide content strategies and influence how users respond to algorithmic signals (Duffy & Meisner, 2022; Abidin, 2016) .

At the same time, the opacity of platform systems can generate perceptions of unpredictability and unfairness, particularly when outcomes such as visibility and reach fluctuate without clear explanation. Within this context, phenomena such as shadow banning emerge as central elements of user experience. Although not formally acknowledged by platforms, shadow banning is commonly described by creators as a reduction in content visibility without notification or justification. This perceived invisibility reflects a broader tension between the need for platform control and the lack of transparency in how such control is exercised (Savolainen, 2022; Cotter, 2023).

The concept of shadow banning can be further understood through the notion of **"**black box gaslighting" which captures the experience of users who perceive negative outcomes while platforms deny or obscure the mechanisms that produce them. This dynamic reinforces uncertainty and can undermine users' sense of agency, as they are left to interpret opaque systems without access to authoritative explanations (Cotter, 2023).

More broadly, these dynamics highlight how platform governance extends beyond technical infrastructures to shape subjective experiences and forms of self-regulation. As creators attempt to align with perceived algorithmic expectations, they engage in continuous processes of adaptation, optimization and self-presentation. This aligns with broader forms of visibility labour, where individuals invest time and effort into maintaining presence and relevance within platform environments (Abidin, 2016). At the same time, such practices can be understood as forms of neo-normative control, in which individuals internalize platform logics and regulate their own behavior in pursuit of visibility and success (Cameron et al., 2025).

Understanding the user perspective is therefore essential for capturing the full complexity of management control in platform contexts. While control is structurally embedded in algorithms and rules, it is enacted and reproduced through users' interpretations and responses (Bucher, 2018; Kellogg et al., 2020). The following sections explore these dynamics in greater detail by examining, first, how creators construct algorithmic imaginaries in order to navigate opaque systems, and second, how phenomena such as shadow banning are experienced as forms of invisible and contested control within the platform environment.

2.3.1 Algorithmic imaginaries: how influencers guess how to grow

In platform environments characterized by opacity and continuous algorithmic evaluation, content creators are required to navigate systems whose underlying logic is only partially accessible. As discussed in the previous sections, visibility is determined through complex, dynamic and often opaque processes, making it difficult for users to establish clear causal relationships between actions and outcomes. In response to this uncertainty, creators develop algorithmic imaginaries: informal, experience-based understandings of how platform algorithms operate and how visibility can be achieved.

Algorithmic imaginaries function as interpretative frameworks through which users attempt to make sense of algorithmic systems. Rather than relying on official explanations, which are often limited or ambiguous, creators construct their own theories based on observable outcomes such as engagement levels, reach fluctuations and audience growth. Through processes of trial and error, users experiment with different variables (such as content format, posting frequency, timing and use of platform features) in order to infer patterns of algorithmic behavior. These practices reflect an ongoing effort to reduce uncertainty by transforming opaque systems into actionable knowledge.

Importantly, these imaginaries are not purely individual constructions but emerge through collective processes of sensemaking. Creators actively exchange information within online communities, sharing tips, strategies and interpretations of how the algorithm functions. This distributed knowledge production gives rise to a form of informal expertise, where platform users collectively develop and refine understandings of algorithmic logic in the absence of formal transparency (Duffy & Meisner, 2022). In this sense, algorithmic imaginaries can be seen as socially constructed narratives that circulate within creator communities, shaping shared expectations about what drives visibility and success.

Within this context, creators engage in forms of visibility labour, investing significant time and effort not only in producing content but also in interpreting platform dynamics and optimizing their practices. Activities such as monitoring analytics, studying trends and adjusting strategies become integral to participation, transforming content creation into a continuous process of evaluation and adaptation (Abidin, 2016). Visibility is

therefore not a passive outcome but an actively produced result, dependent on the ability to align with perceived algorithmic expectations.

At the same time, the reliance on algorithmic imaginaries reflects a deeper condition of structural uncertainty. Because algorithmic systems are dynamic and constantly evolving, the knowledge that creators develop is inherently provisional and unstable. Strategies that appear effective may quickly lose relevance, requiring users to continuously update their assumptions and practices. This ongoing need for adaptation reinforces a condition of dependence on the platform, as creators must remain constantly engaged in order to maintain visibility.

Crucially, algorithmic imaginaries do not simply help users navigate the platform, they also function as mechanisms of behavioral alignment and indirect control. By shaping how users interpret success and failure, these imaginaries influence decision-making and guide content strategies. Creators anticipate algorithmic evaluation and adjust their behavior accordingly, prioritizing formats, styles and topics that are believed to perform well. Over time, this contributes to the standardization and homogenization of content, as users converge toward practices that are perceived to be algorithmically rewarded.

This dynamic reflects broader forms of internalized and neo-normative control, in which individuals actively participate in their own regulation by aligning with organizational logics. Rather than being explicitly instructed, creators internalize platform expectations and self-regulate their behavior in pursuit of visibility and recognition. In this context, control operates not only through external constraints but also through the shaping of user subjectivity, as individuals come to see success as dependent on their ability to adapt to algorithmic systems (Cameron et al., 2025).

At the same time, algorithmic imaginaries are shaped by concerns related to fairness, bias and inequality within platform environments. The opacity of algorithmic systems makes it difficult for users to determine whether outcomes are the result of performance, systemic bias or hidden forms of prioritization. As highlighted in the literature, algorithmic infrastructures can reproduce and amplify existing inequalities, influencing which types of content and creators are more likely to gain visibility (Noble, 2018). These

concerns become embedded within user imaginaries, shaping how creators interpret both success and marginalization.

Importantly, algorithmic imaginaries are not stable or uncontested forms of knowledge, but rather sites of tension and negotiation. Creators rely on these frameworks to navigate the platform, while simultaneously recognizing their limitations and potential inaccuracies. This produces a condition of ambivalence, in which users are both dependent on and skeptical of their own understanding of the system. The algorithm is perceived as both knowable and unknowable, reinforcing the complexity of user engagement with platform governance.

Ultimately, algorithmic imaginaries represent a key mechanism through which platform control is mediated at the user level. By shaping how creators interpret, anticipate and respond to algorithmic systems, these imaginaries contribute to the reproduction of platform logics, aligning user behavior with platform objectives without the need for explicit enforcement. At the same time, they reveal the interpretative labour required to operate within opaque systems, highlighting the active role of users in making sense of and sustaining platform governance.

This interpretative dimension becomes particularly salient in situations where outcomes cannot be easily explained through observable rules or metrics. Among these, the phenomenon of shadow banning emerges as a critical point of tension, capturing the perceived disconnect between user expectations and platform behavior. The following section explores this phenomenon as a form of invisible and contested control, further illustrating the complexities of algorithmic governance from the user perspective.

2.3.2 Shadow banning: “black box gaslighting” on Instagram

Within platform environments characterized by algorithmic opacity and continuous evaluation, the limits of user understanding become particularly visible in relation to phenomena that cannot be clearly explained through observable rules or metrics. Among these, shadow banning has emerged as a central concept through which creators interpret

sudden and unexplained drops in visibility. Although platforms typically deny the existence of such practices, many users report experiences consistent with reduced reach, limited discoverability or exclusion from recommendation systems without explicit notification or justification (Savolainen, 2022).

From a user perspective, shadow banning refers to a form of invisible visibility suppression, in which content remains technically available but is algorithmically deprioritized, making it significantly less likely to reach audiences. Unlike formal sanctions, such as content removal or account suspension, shadow banning operates without clear signals, leaving users uncertain about whether they have violated platform rules or are being affected by algorithmic dynamics. This ambiguity makes it difficult to distinguish between poor performance and systemic intervention, reinforcing the complexity of navigating platform environments (Savolainen, 2022).

The significance of shadow banning lies not only in its potential effects on visibility, but in what it reveals about the nature of platform governance. As highlighted in the literature, the opacity of algorithmic systems creates conditions in which users must interpret outcomes without access to authoritative explanations. In this context, shadow banning functions as a diagnostic category, a way for users to make sense of negative outcomes that cannot otherwise be explained. It becomes part of the broader repertoire of algorithmic imaginaries, providing a narrative through which creators interpret perceived inconsistencies in platform behavior (Bucher, 2018; Duffy & Meisner, 2022).

This dynamic can be understood through the concept of “black box gaslighting”, which captures the experience of users who perceive meaningful changes in their visibility while platforms deny or obscure the mechanisms responsible for those changes. This dynamic suggests, users are not only confronted with opaque systems but are also placed in a position where their interpretations are implicitly delegitimized. The platform maintains epistemic authority over how its systems function, while users are left to question the validity of their own experiences (Cotter, 2023).

Black box gaslighting represents a particularly powerful form of control because it operates at both a technical and psychological level. Technically, it relies on the opacity of algorithmic systems, which prevents users from verifying whether visibility reductions

are intentional or incidental. Psychologically, it introduces doubt and uncertainty, as users cannot determine whether their experiences reflect actual platform behavior or misinterpretation. This dual effect undermines users' sense of agency, as they are required to act within a system that they cannot fully understand or confidently interpret (Cotter, 2023).

At the same time, shadow banning can be interpreted as a form of implicit disciplinary mechanism. Unlike explicit sanctions, which clearly signal rule violations, shadow banning operates through the modulation of visibility, subtly penalizing certain behaviors without direct confrontation. This aligns with broader forms of platform control, where governance is exercised through the distribution of attention rather than through overt enforcement. By reducing visibility, the platform can influence behavior while maintaining plausible deniability regarding its actions (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2018).

This form of control is particularly effective because it interacts with the economic and affective dimensions of platform participation. For content creators, visibility is directly linked to audience growth, engagement and monetization opportunities. A sudden drop in reach can therefore have significant material consequences, as well as emotional effects such as frustration, anxiety and self-doubt. In this sense, shadow banning does not simply affect performance metrics but impacts the broader experience of platform participation (Duffy & Meisner, 2022).

Moreover, the uncertainty associated with shadow banning reinforces patterns of self-regulation and over-compliance. In the absence of clear explanations, creators may attempt to correct perceived issues by modifying their behavior, avoiding certain topics or adopting safer and more standardized content strategies. This response reflects a precautionary logic, where users adapt not to explicit rules but to perceived risks, often amplifying the effects of platform control. In this way, shadow banning contributes to the internalization of platform norms, as users discipline themselves in anticipation of invisible sanctions (Kellogg et al., 2020; Cameron et al., 2025; Savolainen, 2022)

These dynamics are further intensified by broader concerns about bias and inequality within algorithmic systems. The lack of transparency makes it difficult to assess whether visibility reductions are applied uniformly or whether certain types of content, identities

or perspectives are disproportionately affected. As highlighted in the literature, algorithmic systems can reproduce and amplify existing social inequalities, shaping who is seen and who remains marginalized within digital spaces (Noble, 2018). Within this context, shadow banning becomes not only a matter of individual experience but also a potential site of structural exclusion.

Importantly, shadow banning also highlights the limits of algorithmic imaginaries. While imaginaries provide users with frameworks for interpreting platform behavior, they are insufficient to fully explain phenomena that are inherently opaque and contested. The persistence of shadow banning as a concept reflects both the necessity and the inadequacy of user-generated knowledge in navigating platform systems. Users rely on shared narratives to make sense of their experiences, yet these narratives remain uncertain and open to interpretation (Savolainen, 2022).

Ultimately, shadow banning illustrates how platform governance operates not only through visible rules and measurable metrics, but also through ambiguity, opacity and denial. It represents a form of control that is difficult to observe, verify or contest, yet deeply influential in shaping user behavior and perception. By combining technical opacity with epistemic asymmetry, platforms are able to regulate participation while maintaining distance from the consequences of their decisions (Cotter, 2023; Savolainen, 2022; Leerssen, 2023).

Crucially, shadow banning can be understood as an extreme manifestation of the hybrid governance model discussed in the previous sections. While formal rules define the boundaries of acceptable behavior, algorithmic systems, and the uncertainties surrounding them, shape the lived experience of participation. Control is exercised not only through what is explicitly enforced, but also through what remains hidden, ambiguous and unresolved (Gillespie, 2018; Bucher, 2018; Leerssen, 2023).

Taken together, the analysis of algorithmic imaginaries and shadow banning highlights the central role of interpretation, uncertainty and perception in the exercise of platform-based control. These dynamics demonstrate that management control in digital environments cannot be reduced to formal rules or observable metrics, but must be understood as a complex interplay between visible governance mechanisms and opaque,

continuously operating algorithmic systems. Within this configuration, control is not only imposed through explicit regulation, but also produced through ambiguity, indirect feedback and the anticipatory behaviors of users navigating uncertain environments.

This perspective extends existing understandings of management control by showing how, in platform contexts, control operates through the modulation of visibility and the structuring of attention rather than through direct supervision or clearly defined performance criteria. As a result, users are not simply subject to external constraints, but become active participants in the reproduction of platform logics, adapting their behavior in response to perceived signals, risks and opportunities. This process reflects a shift from hierarchical and rule-based control toward forms of governance that are distributed, data-driven and deeply embedded in everyday practices.

In this sense, platforms such as Instagram can be understood as exercising a form of algorithmic management that is both pervasive and difficult to contest, as it relies on epistemic asymmetries and limited transparency. The combination of bureaucratic structures and algorithmic systems produces a hybrid model of governance in which control is simultaneously explicit and implicit, stable and dynamic, visible and concealed. This hybrid configuration not only shapes what users can do, but also how they interpret their own performance and position within the platform ecosystem.

Building on these theoretical insights, the following chapter moves from conceptual analysis to empirical investigation, examining how these dynamics of control are perceived, experienced and negotiated by creators within the Veneto Creators Community. By grounding these abstract mechanisms in the lived experiences of users, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how algorithmic governance operates in practice.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design: quantitative survey with open-ended qualitative responses

This study adopts a quantitative survey complemented by open-ended qualitative responses research design based on a structured survey in order to investigate how content creators perceive and respond to algorithmic control within Instagram. he choice of a primarily quantitative approach is driven by the objective of systematically measuring key constructs identified in the theoretical framework, including perceived algorithmic control, behavioral responses and psychological impact. By collecting standardized data across a sample of creators, the survey enables the identification of patterns, relationships and variations in user experience that would be difficult to capture through purely qualitative methods.

Quantitative surveys are particularly suitable for research contexts in which the aim is to measure perceptions and behaviors across a population, allowing for comparability and the identification of generalizable patterns within a defined sample. In the case of social media platforms, user experiences are heterogeneous and shaped by multiple interacting factors, including content type, audience size and platform dynamics. A survey-based approach allows these differences to be systematically captured and analyzed, providing a structured overview of how creators engage with and interpret platform governance (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The selection of a quantitative methodology is also consistent with the broader transformation of digital environments into data-rich ecosystems, where user behavior and interaction are continuously quantified and analyzed. Within such contexts, quantitative methods are particularly effective in capturing the measurable dimensions of user experience, including engagement patterns, perceived visibility and behavioral adaptation. This aligns with the increasing relevance of data-driven approaches in the study of digital platforms, where large-scale patterns and statistical relationships play a central role in both platform operation and academic analysis (Kitchin, 2014).

From a theoretical perspective, the use of a quantitative survey is directly linked to the conceptual framework developed in Chapters 1 and 2. As discussed, platform governance operates through algorithmic systems that continuously evaluate and shape user behavior, creating conditions of asymmetrical control and uncertainty. These dynamics manifest at the user level through observable and measurable phenomena, such as perceived pressure to post, adaptation of content strategies and emotional responses to fluctuations in visibility. A quantitative design allows these phenomena to be operationalized into variables that can be systematically measured and compared across respondents.

More specifically, the survey focuses on three core dimensions of platform-based control. First, it measures perceived algorithmic control, capturing the extent to which creators feel that their visibility and success are influenced by platform systems. Second, it examines behavioral responses, including both compliance strategies (e.g., adapting content to algorithmic preferences) and resistance practices (e.g., attempts to circumvent perceived constraints). Third, it investigates the psychological impact of platform participation, including feelings of anxiety, frustration and uncertainty associated with performance and visibility. These dimensions reflect key aspects of algorithmic management, where control is exercised through continuous evaluation, indirect incentives and the shaping of user behavior (Kadolkar et al., 2024; Zhu, 2024).

The adoption of a quantitative approach also enables the analysis of relationships between variables, which is central to the objectives of this study. For example, it allows for the examination of whether higher levels of perceived control are associated with increased behavioral compliance or whether experiences of reduced visibility correlate with higher levels of psychological distress. By capturing these relationships, the study moves beyond descriptive analysis and contributes to a more structured understanding of how algorithmic control operates at the user level.

In addition, the use of a structured survey instrument ensures consistency, reliability and comparability in data collection. All participants are presented with the same set of questions, measured using standardized response scales, which reduces variability in interpretation and enhances the robustness of the findings. This is particularly important

in research contexts involving subjective perceptions, where methodological rigor is necessary to ensure the validity of results.

While qualitative approaches could provide deeper insights into individual experiences, they would be less effective in capturing the breadth and variability of perceptions across a larger sample of creators. Given the objective of identifying general patterns and relationships within a specific community, a quantitative survey represents the most appropriate methodological choice. At the same time, the survey included an optional open-ended question that allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences with Instagram's algorithmic systems. These responses were not subjected to a full qualitative coding procedure but were used to complement and contextualize the quantitative findings. The inclusion of open-ended comments provides additional insight into how creators interpret visibility fluctuations, perceived shadow banning and algorithmic control, enriching the overall understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Ultimately, the adoption of a quantitative survey design reflects both the nature of the research problem and the theoretical framework guiding the study. By treating perceptions of algorithmic control as measurable phenomena, the study aligns methodological choices with the data-driven logic of platform environments themselves. This approach not only enables the systematic analysis of user experiences but also provides a robust empirical foundation for examining how control is exercised, perceived and enacted within the contemporary creator economy.

3.2 Case study: why Instagram? The centrality of the platform in the creator economy

The quantitative research design outlined in the previous section requires an empirical context in which the key constructs of the study (namely algorithmic control, visibility, behavioral adaptation and psychological impact) are both salient and measurable. Within this framework, Instagram is selected as the focal case study, not only for its widespread

adoption but, more importantly, for its central role in structuring the dynamics of the contemporary creator economy.

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, digital platforms have evolved into socio-technical infrastructures that organize participation, economic activity and value creation. Among these platforms, Instagram occupies a particularly prominent position due to its strong integration of content production, audience engagement and monetization opportunities. It functions as a key environment in which creators operate as hybrid actors, simultaneously engaging in self-expression and economic activity. This dual role makes Instagram especially relevant for examining how visibility is transformed into value and how participation becomes structured around performance metrics (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018).

More specifically, Instagram represents a paradigmatic example of the attention-driven and algorithmically mediated environment described in the theoretical framework. The platform's evolution toward short-form video content, particularly through the introduction of Reels, has intensified competition for visibility and reinforced the centrality of engagement metrics as determinants of success. In this context, visibility is no longer primarily a function of social networks but is increasingly governed by algorithmic systems that rank, filter and distribute content based on predicted user behavior. This makes Instagram an especially suitable context for studying how algorithmic control operates in practice (Bucher, 2018; Cotter, 2023).

The relevance of Instagram is further reinforced by its role within the creator economy, where content production is increasingly organized as a form of digital labour. Creators are required to continuously produce content, maintain audience engagement and adapt to platform dynamics in order to remain visible and competitive. This process involves significant investments of time, effort and emotional resources, often under conditions of uncertainty and without guaranteed returns (Duffy, 2017; Abidin, 2016). In this sense, Instagram functions not only as a platform for communication but as a system that structures work-like activities and shapes the conditions under which creators operate.

From a management control perspective, Instagram is particularly relevant because it exemplifies the transition toward asymmetrical hybrid governance, in which formal rules

coexist with opaque algorithmic systems. On the one hand, the platform provides explicit guidelines that define acceptable content and behavior. On the other hand, it relies on complex algorithmic infrastructures to determine visibility, thereby shaping outcomes through mechanisms that are not fully transparent to users. This dual structure makes Instagram an ideal setting for examining how control is exercised both directly and indirectly, through the combination of rule-based regulation and data-driven evaluation (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2018).

A further reason for selecting Instagram lies in the contested nature of its governance mechanisms, particularly in relation to issues of algorithmic opacity and perceived unfairness. As discussed in Chapter 2.3, creators frequently report experiences of declining reach, unexplained fluctuations in engagement and perceived forms of content suppression. These experiences have contributed to the emergence of interpretative frameworks such as algorithmic imaginaries and shadow banning, through which users attempt to make sense of platform behavior (Cotter, 2023). The prevalence of these perceptions makes Instagram a particularly rich context for investigating how algorithmic control is experienced and interpreted at the user level.

In addition to its theoretical relevance, Instagram is also an appropriate choice from an empirical perspective, particularly within the Italian and Veneto context. The platform is widely used among content creators, influencers and small-scale entrepreneurs, making it a central space for digital content production and audience engagement (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017; Cunningham & Craig, 2019). The presence of active local creator communities provides access to a population of users who are directly involved in the dynamics under investigation, thereby supporting the feasibility and relevance of the data collection process (Weller, 2016).

The selection of Instagram is therefore closely aligned with the quantitative survey approach adopted in this study. As outlined in Section 3.1, the objective is to measure perceptions, behaviors and psychological responses across a sample of creators. Instagram provides a context in which these dimensions are not only theoretically relevant but also empirically observable, as creators are continuously exposed to algorithmic evaluation and its consequences. This alignment between theoretical constructs,

methodological approach, and empirical setting strengthens the overall coherence of the research design (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017).

Ultimately, Instagram is not selected merely as a convenient case study but as a strategically relevant context in which the dynamics of algorithmic control are particularly visible and consequential. Its centrality in the creator economy, its reliance on opaque algorithmic systems and its contested governance practices make it an ideal platform for examining how control is structured, experienced and negotiated in contemporary digital environments. By focusing on Instagram, this study is able to translate abstract theoretical concepts into concrete empirical observations, providing a robust foundation for the analysis presented in the following chapters (van Dijck et al., 2018; Bucher, 2018; Cotter, 2023).

3.3 Data collection: sampling Instagram creators and influencers

Data for this study were collected through a quantitative online survey administered to Instagram content creators. The data collection process was designed to reach individuals who are actively engaged in content production and whose visibility, engagement and potential for monetization are directly influenced by platform dynamics. Given the decentralized and heterogeneous nature of the creator economy, a non-probabilistic sampling strategy was adopted, combining purposive and convenience sampling techniques in order to access a relevant and context-specific population.

The study specifically focuses on the Veneto Creators Community, understood as a network of content creators operating within the Veneto region. This localized focus allows for a more coherent and context-sensitive analysis, capturing how global platform dynamics are interpreted and experienced within a shared socio-cultural environment.

The choice of a non-probabilistic approach reflects both the characteristics of the research context and the objectives of the study. Content creators do not constitute a clearly

bounded or easily identifiable population and there is no comprehensive database from which a random sample could be drawn. As a result, the sampling strategy prioritizes relevance and accessibility, focusing on individuals who are directly involved in the phenomena under investigation, rather than aiming for statistical representativeness (Bryman, 2016). This approach is consistent with research on digital platforms, where targeted sampling is often necessary to reach specific user groups embedded within online environments (Weller, 2016).

Participants were recruited through the Veneto Creators Community. More specifically, the questionnaire was first shared with the community manager, who acted as a gatekeeper and distributed the survey link to creators and influencers within the community. This approach allowed the study to access a targeted population of Instagram creators who are directly involved in content production and platform-based visibility dynamics (Weller, 2016). Rather than relying on open recruitment through hashtags, public searches or direct messages, this strategy ensured that participants belonged to a defined and relevant creator network, strengthening the coherence of the sample.

This gatekeeper-based recruitment strategy was appropriate for the objectives of the study because it provided access to a specific community that would otherwise be difficult to reach through traditional sampling methods (Bryman, 2016). At the same time, it ensured that respondents were embedded within the same local creator ecosystem, allowing the research to examine how algorithmic control is perceived and experienced within a shared socio-cultural and professional context.

To ensure the relevance and consistency of the sample, a set of inclusion criteria was defined. Participants were required to:
(1) have an active Instagram account;
(2) regularly post content, defined as at least one post per week;
(3) identify as content creators or influencers, either professionally or semi-professionally;
and (4) belong to, or be connected with, the Veneto Creators Community. These criteria ensure that respondents have sufficient experience with the platform and

are directly exposed to the dynamics of algorithmic visibility, content evaluation and audience engagement.

In addition to these criteria, the study incorporates a differentiation between levels of creator activity and audience size, recognizing that experiences of algorithmic control may vary depending on the scale of a creator's reach. Respondents were therefore categorized into influencer tiers based on their follower count, following commonly used classifications within the creator economy:

- Nano influencers (fewer than 1,000 followers),
- Micro influencers (1,000 to 10,000 followers),
- Mid-tier influencers (10,000 to 100,000 followers),
- Macro influencers (more than 100,000 followers).

This categorization enables a more nuanced analysis of the data, allowing for comparisons across groups that differ in terms of visibility, professionalization and dependence on platform systems (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017). For example, smaller creators may experience greater uncertainty due to limited reach, while larger creators may face increased pressure to maintain performance and audience engagement. Including multiple tiers therefore enhances the analytical depth of the study.

The final sample consisted of 52, representing a diverse set of creator profiles in terms of follower count, content category and posting frequency. This diversity is important for capturing variation in user experience, particularly in relation to perceptions of algorithmic control, behavioral adaptation and psychological impact. While the sample does not aim to be statistically representative of all Instagram users, it is analytically appropriate for the research objectives, as it focuses on individuals who are directly affected by the platform dynamics under investigation.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations associated with the sampling strategy. The use of non-probabilistic sampling introduces potential biases, including self-selection bias, as individuals who choose to participate may have stronger opinions or more pronounced experiences related to algorithmic control. In addition, the reliance on online recruitment channels may favor more active or digitally connected users. However, these

limitations are mitigated by the targeted nature of the sample, which ensures that respondents are relevant to the research questions and possess direct experience with the phenomena being studied.

Despite these limitations, the data collection process provides a robust empirical foundation for the study. By targeting active creators within the Veneto Creators Community and by capturing variation across influencer tiers, the sampling strategy ensures that the collected data are both contextually grounded and theoretically meaningful. This approach supports the subsequent analysis of how algorithmic control is perceived, experienced and negotiated within the Instagram environment.

Overall, the data collection strategy is fully aligned with the research design outlined in Section 3.1 and the case study focus presented in Section 3.2. It reflects the characteristics of the platform environment, leverages the networked structure of the creator economy and ensures that the study captures the experiences of users who are directly engaged in the dynamics of visibility and algorithmic governance. This provides a coherent and methodologically sound basis for the analysis presented in the following chapter.

3.4 Variable measurement: perceived algorithmic control, algorithmic opacity, algorithmic anxiety, behavioral compliance and behavioral resistance/adaptation.

Building on the research design and data collection strategy outlined in the previous sections, this study operationalizes the key theoretical constructs developed in Chapters 1 and 2 into a set of measurable variables. The objective is to translate abstract concepts such as algorithmic control, opacity and user response into empirical indicators that can be systematically analysed. The survey instrument was therefore designed to capture four primary dimensions: algorithmic control, algorithmic opacity, algorithmic anxiety and behavioral responses; while also collecting contextual information related to creator activity and engagement. All perceptual variables were measured using five-point Likert

scales (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree), allowing for comparability across respondents and the construction of composite variables.

1. Perceived algorithmic control

Perceived algorithmic control refers to the extent to which creators believe that their visibility, performance and success on Instagram are shaped by platform systems rather than by autonomous creative choices. This construct reflects the broader framework of algorithmic management discussed in Chapter 2, where control is exercised through continuous evaluation and the distribution of visibility. In the survey, this dimension was measured through items capturing dependency, pressure and behavioral alignment, including statements such as “Instagram’s algorithm strongly influences what content becomes visible,” “I feel pressured to post frequently to remain visible,” “I feel that I must adapt my content to what the algorithm prefers” and “My success depends more on the algorithm than on my creativity.” These items were aggregated to form a composite indicator of perceived control, enabling the analysis of how strongly creators experience platform governance as a determining force in their activity.

2. Algorithmic opacity

Algorithmic opacity captures the perceived lack of transparency and predictability in how Instagram’s systems operate. This dimension reflects the information asymmetry between platforms and users, as well as the interpretative uncertainty that characterizes participation in algorithmically mediated environments. It was operationalized through two groups of Likert-scale items. The first group measured general opacity and unpredictability, including difficulty in predicting content performance, uncertainty about why content performs well or poorly, reliance on trial-and-error and learning from other creators or online advice. The second group measured perceived visibility disruption, including unexplained reductions in visibility, perceived reach reduction, sudden changes in engagement, posts being shown to fewer people than usual and perceived shadow banning. These items were combined to form the composite indicator of algorithmic opacity used in the analysis.

3. Algorithmic anxiety

The psychological impact of platform participation was operationalized through the construct of algorithmic anxiety, defined as the emotional response to fluctuations in visibility, engagement and perceived evaluation. This dimension captures how algorithmic control extends beyond behavior to affect user wellbeing. It was measured through items addressing emotional reactions such as frustration following drops in engagement, anxiety when content performs poorly, self-doubt linked to low visibility, stress associated with maintaining visibility and mood variation based on engagement metrics. These items were combined into a composite variable, allowing the study to assess the extent to which platform dynamics generate forms of psychological pressure and instability among creators.

4. Behavioral compliance and exploratory resistance/adaptation indicator

Behavioral responses were operationalized through two distinct sub-dimensions: behavioral compliance and behavioral resistance/adaptation. Behavioral compliance refers to practices through which creators align their behavior with perceived platform expectations. This was measured through items such as “I change my content strategy based on performance metrics,” “I follow trends mainly to increase visibility,” “I delete posts that perform poorly” and “I avoid certain topics to prevent negative effects.” These items capture processes of self-regulation, anticipatory adaptation and internalization of platform logic.

Behavioral resistance/adaptation, by contrast, refers to practices through which creators attempt to work around, negotiate or reduce dependence on platform constraints. This dimension was examined through two types of indicators: categorical responses concerning the use of engagement pods, algospeak, backup accounts and paid promotion, and the Likert-scale item “I try to work around the algorithm when possible.” Because the categorical responses and the Likert-scale item do not form a homogeneous multi-item scale, behavioral resistance/adaptation was treated as an exploratory indicator rather than a traditional composite variable.

3.5 Open-ended responses

In addition to closed-ended questions measured through Likert scales and categorical variables, the questionnaire included an optional open-ended question inviting respondents to share additional comments regarding their experiences with Instagram's algorithm, visibility dynamics and perceived shadow banning. The purpose of this question was to give participants the opportunity to elaborate on perceptions and experiences that could not be fully captured through standardized survey items.

Given the primarily quantitative nature of the study, the open-ended responses were not treated as a separate qualitative dataset nor subjected to formal coding. Instead, they were used as complementary qualitative evidence to contextualize and interpret the quantitative findings. The comments were therefore used as complementary qualitative evidence, helping to contextualize the statistical results and provide greater insight into how creators interpret algorithmic governance in practice.

This additional layer of analysis is particularly useful because the study investigates subjective perceptions of opacity, control and visibility disruption. Open-ended responses make it possible to capture how creators describe these experiences in their own words, thereby strengthening the interpretation of the quantitative findings without changing the overall quantitative design of the research.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Building on the methodological approach outlined in Chapter 3, this chapter presents the empirical findings derived from the survey administered to Instagram creators within the Veneto Creators Community. The analysis follows the variables operationalized in Section 3.4: perceived algorithmic control, algorithmic opacity, algorithmic anxiety, behavioral compliance and behavioral resistance/adaptation. After providing a descriptive overview of the sample, the chapter examines how creators perceive algorithmic control, how they experience algorithmic opacity through visibility disruption and shadow banning, how these dynamics generate algorithmic anxiety, and how creators respond through compliance and resistance practices.

Before discussing each variable in detail, descriptive statistics were calculated for the Likert-scale items used to operationalize the main constructs defined in Chapter 3. For each item, the analysis considers the minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation. Composite scores were then calculated by averaging the items belonging to each variable: perceived algorithmic control, algorithmic opacity, algorithmic anxiety, behavioral compliance and behavioral resistance/adaptation. Non-Likert questions, such as the experience, frequency and duration of reach drops, were treated as descriptive indicators rather than included in the composite variables.

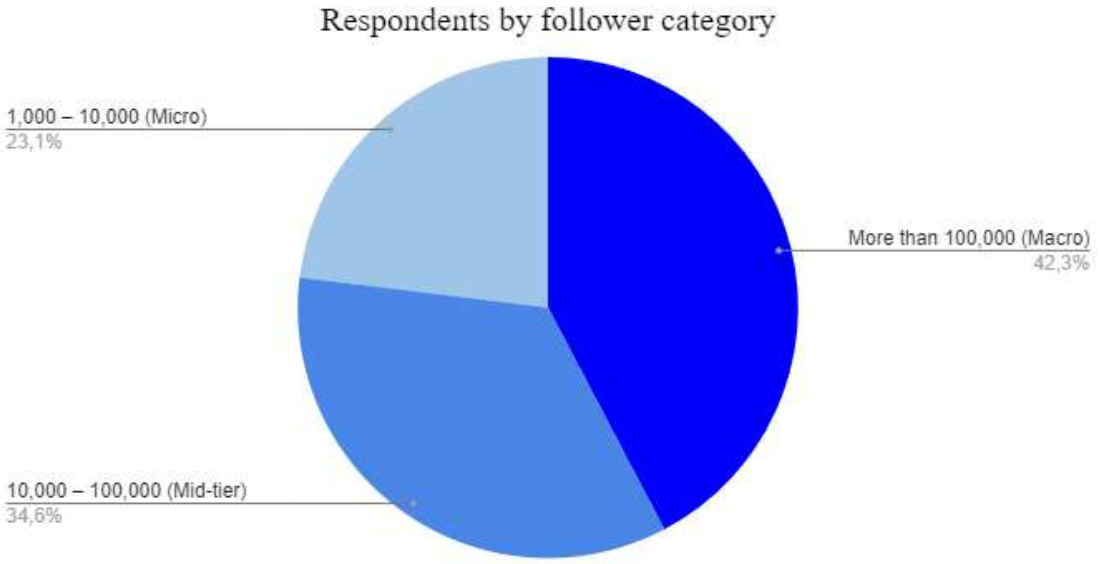
In addition to the closed-ended survey items, respondents were given the opportunity to provide open-ended comments regarding their experiences with Instagram's algorithm. Selected responses are incorporated throughout the analysis to complement the quantitative findings and provide additional insight into how creators interpret and experience algorithmic governance in practice.

4.1 Sample overview

The final sample is composed of Instagram creators belonging to the Veneto Creators Community. This section provides a descriptive overview of respondents' profiles, focusing on audience size, posting frequency, content category, experience on Instagram and monetization status. This preliminary analysis is important because creators' perceptions of algorithmic control are likely to be influenced by their degree of professionalization, their dependence on visibility and the intensity of their interaction with the platform. Social media users cannot be treated as a homogeneous group, since their practices and experiences vary according to how they use platforms and the role these platforms play in their personal or professional activity (Weller, 2016).

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of respondents by follower category**.** The distribution shows that the sample is mainly composed of creators with established audiences. Macro-creators, with more than 100,000 followers, represent the largest group, accounting for 42.3% of respondents. Mid-tier creators, with between 10,000 and 100,000 followers, represent 34.6%, while micro-creators, with between 1,000 and 10,000 followers, account for 23.1%. No respondent falls into the nano-creator category. This profile is particularly relevant for the study because most participants operate in contexts where visibility, reach and engagement are central to their activity. The strong presence of mid-tier and macro-creators suggests that the sample is well suited to examining Instagram as a performance-oriented environment in which algorithmic visibility may influence professional opportunities, strategic decisions and creator behavior.

Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by follower category



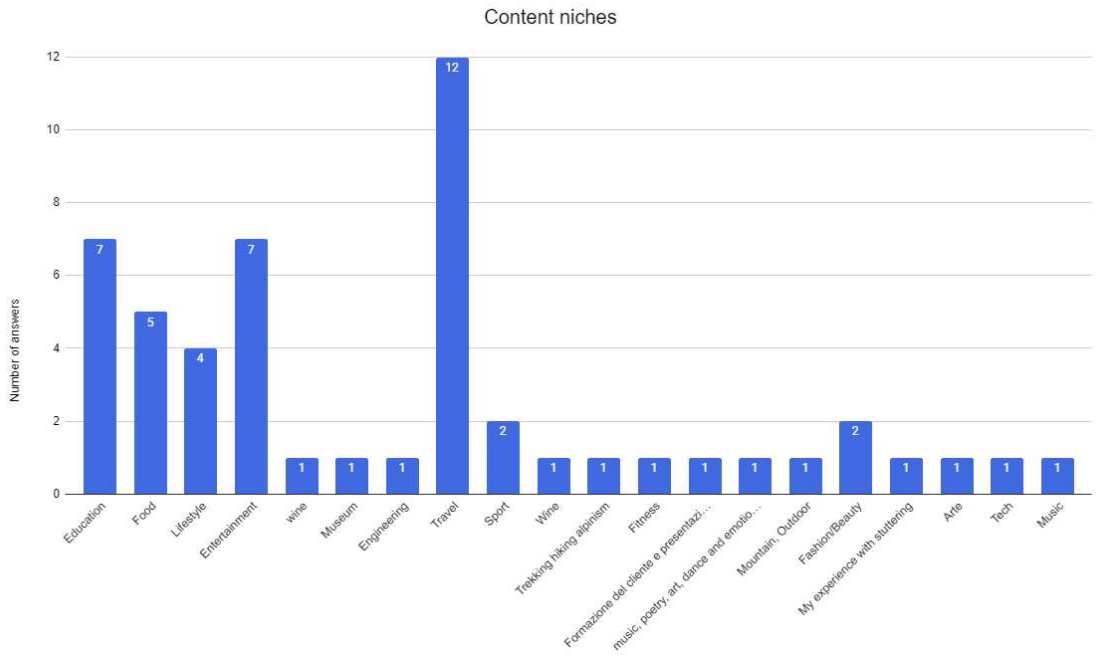
Source: Author's elaboration based on survey data (2026).

The posting frequency of respondents confirms that the sample is composed of active platform users. Overall, 80.8% of respondents post at least once per week, with 13.5% posting daily, 32.7% posting three to five times per week and another 34.6% posting one to two times per week. Only 19.2% post less than once per week. This indicates that most respondents maintain a regular relationship with Instagram's content production cycle and are repeatedly exposed to engagement metrics, audience feedback and visibility fluctuations. This is relevant because platform control becomes more observable when users interact frequently with data-based feedback systems and continuously adjust their practices in response to measurable performance indicators (Kitchin, 2014).

Figure 2 shows the distribution of respondents across content categories, highlighting the diversity of the sample. Travel is the most represented category, accounting for 23.1% of respondents, followed by education and entertainment, each representing 13.5%. Food accounts for 9.6%, while lifestyle represents 7.7%. The remaining responses are distributed across sport, fashion and beauty, fitness, wine, art, music, technology, outdoor content, museum-related content, engineering, customer education and personal experience-based content. This diversity strengthens the empirical value of the sample

because it allows the study to examine algorithmic control across different forms of content production rather than within a single niche. At the same time, the prominence of travel, education and entertainment suggests that the sample is strongly connected to sectors where visual storytelling, audience engagement and platform visibility are especially important.

Figure 2: Distribution of respondents by content category



Source: Author's elaboration based on survey data (2026).

Respondents also show a high level of experience on Instagram. 69.2% have been actively creating content for more than three years, while 30.8% have between one and three years of experience. No respondents reported less than one year of content creation activity. This means that the sample is not composed of occasional or recently active users, but of creators with sustained exposure to Instagram's evolution over time. Their experience is particularly valuable for the research because they are likely to have observed changes in reach, engagement, content formats and algorithmic behavior across different phases of platform development.

Finally, the monetization profile of the sample confirms its relevance for studying Instagram within the creator economy. 38.5% of respondents report earning money

regularly from their Instagram activity, while 50.0% earn money occasionally. Only a small minority either does not currently monetize its activity but would like to, or does not earn money from Instagram, with each category representing 5.8% of the sample. This suggests that, for most respondents, Instagram is not merely a space of personal expression, but also a professional or semi-professional environment. When visibility is connected to income, collaborations and audience growth, algorithmic dynamics become more consequential for creators' work and decision-making.

On the whole, the sample can be described as active, experienced and largely monetized, with a strong presence of mid-tier and macro-creators. This profile makes the dataset particularly appropriate for analysing perceptions of algorithmic control, because respondents are directly exposed to Instagram's systems of visibility, engagement and performance evaluation. The following sections build on this sample profile to examine how creators perceive algorithmic influence, how they interpret visibility fluctuations and how they adapt their behavior in response to platform dynamics.

Having outlined the profile of the respondents, the following sections analyse the four variables operationalized in Chapter 3: perceived algorithmic control, algorithmic opacity, algorithmic anxiety, behavioral compliance and behavioral resistance/adaptation.

4.2 Perceived algorithmic control: content adaptation to algorithmic expectations

This section examines perceived algorithmic control, understood as the extent to which creators believe that Instagram shapes visibility, performance and success through platform systems.

The findings from the survey show that Instagram is widely perceived by creators as a platform that actively structures visibility and performance. Rather than experiencing visibility as a purely organic result of audience interest or content quality, respondents

tend to understand it as something strongly mediated by the algorithm. This perception is central to the idea of "feeding the beast": creators feel that remaining visible requires continuous activity, strategic adaptation and attention to the formats that the platform appears to reward.

The composite score for perceived algorithmic control is relatively high, with a mean of 3.52 and a standard deviation of 0.70. This indicates that respondents generally tend to perceive Instagram as influencing visibility and success, although responses vary across the different items composing the variable.

Table 2 summarizes the main indicators of perceived algorithmic control, including visibility influence, posting pressure, format preference and perceived dependence on the algorithm.

Table 2: Perceived algorithmic control indicators

Statement	Agree/Strongly Agree
Instagram favors Reels	80.8%
Algorithm influences visibility	71.2%
Pressure to post frequently	63.5%
Must adapt content	32.7%
Success depends more on algorithm than creativity	28.8%

Source: Author's elaboration based on survey data (2026).

The most general indicator of perceived algorithmic influence is the extent to which respondents believe that Instagram's algorithm determines what becomes visible. In this respect, the results are clear: 71.2% of respondents agree or strongly agree that the algorithm strongly influences content visibility, while only 9.6% disagree. This suggests that creators largely recognize Instagram as a system in which visibility is filtered and distributed through platform mechanisms rather than simply produced by audience demand. Such a finding is consistent with the broader understanding of algorithmic management as a form of control that operates through data-driven evaluation, ranking and allocation of opportunities rather than direct supervision (Duggan et al., 2023).

This perception becomes more concrete when considering the pressure to post frequently. 63.5% of respondents agree or strongly agree that they feel pressured to post frequently in order to remain visible. This result indicates that creators experience Instagram as a platform that rewards continuity and punishes inactivity, at least in terms of perceived visibility. Posting is therefore not only a voluntary creative act, but also a strategic behavior shaped by the expectation that regular production is necessary to maintain relevance. This reflects a broader dynamic of algorithmic control in which users adapt their work rhythms to the platform's perceived demands, internalizing expectations of constant availability and continuous performance (Lu et al., 2024; Lata, Burdon & Reddel, 2022).

The clearest expression of perceived control concerns content format. 80.8% of respondents agree or strongly agree that Instagram favors certain formats, such as Reels over static images. This remains the strongest result in this section and suggests that creators perceive Instagram not only as influencing how often they should post, but also what kind of content they should produce. The platform is therefore experienced as shaping creative choices through format-based incentives. Creators may remain formally free to choose their content format, but the perceived visibility advantage of Reels creates an indirect pressure to adapt. This is a particularly relevant form of control because it does not operate through explicit obligation, but through the unequal distribution of visibility across formats.

The perception that Instagram rewards specific formats and behaviors also emerges from the open-ended responses. One respondent noted that *"Instagram's algorithm has a strong impact on visibility and sometimes makes authentic content harder to reach people. I still believe creativity, emotions and human connection should matter more than trends and numbers."* This comment is particularly revealing because it captures one of the central tensions identified throughout the analysis. Creators recognize the importance of adapting to algorithmic preferences, yet many remain reluctant to reduce success entirely to platform logic. The statement therefore reflects the coexistence of control and agency that characterizes creator experiences on Instagram.

The data on content adaptation are more nuanced. While 32.7% of respondents agree or strongly agree that they must adapt their content to what the algorithm prefers, 38.5% remain neutral and 28.8% disagree. This suggests that creators do not all experience adaptation as direct constraint. For some, adapting to the algorithm may be perceived as a normal part of platform work; for others, it may be less central to their strategy or less openly acknowledged. The high level of neutrality is particularly interesting because it may indicate ambivalence: creators recognize the relevance of the algorithm, but may not fully identify their own creative choices as being controlled by it. Algorithmic control may therefore be experienced less as explicit coercion and more as a subtle pressure that becomes normalized within everyday platform activity.

This interpretation is supported by the responses to the statement that success depends more on the algorithm than on creativity. Only 28.8% of respondents agree or strongly agree, while 46.2% disagree. This finding is important because it shows that creators do not perceive themselves as completely dominated by the platform. Although they acknowledge the importance of algorithmic visibility, many still attribute success to creativity, content quality and personal strategy. In this sense, the data reveal a tension between control and agency: creators perceive Instagram as a powerful system that shapes visibility, but they do not entirely abandon the belief that their own creative capacity matters.

In general, the findings suggest that Instagram's control is experienced primarily through visibility pressure, rather than through explicit commands. Creators feel that they must remain active, pay attention to platform-favored formats and interpret algorithmic signals in order to sustain their reach. The strongest evidence concerns the perceived preference for Reels and the pressure to post frequently, both of which support the image of Instagram as a platform that creators must continuously "feed" to remain visible. However, the data also show that this control is not absolute. Respondents continue to see creativity and personal strategy as relevant, suggesting that algorithmic control operates by reshaping the conditions of creative agency rather than eliminating it completely.

The most relevant insight emerging from these findings is the coexistence of pressure and agency. Respondents clearly perceive Instagram as a system that shapes visibility through

frequency and format-based incentives, especially through the perceived preference for Reels. However, the lower agreement with the idea that success depends more on the algorithm than on creativity suggests that creators do not experience themselves as entirely passive subjects of platform control. Instead, they appear to negotiate algorithmic pressure by combining strategic adaptation with continued belief in creativity, quality and personal positioning. This supports a nuanced interpretation of algorithmic control: Instagram does not simply determine creator behavior, but reorganizes the conditions under which creative agency is exercised.

From a management control perspective, these results support the idea that Instagram functions as an indirect and algorithmically mediated control system. The platform does not need to instruct creators directly; instead, it shapes behavior through performance feedback, visibility incentives and format-based rewards. This suggests that algorithmic control in creator economies operates through subtle mechanisms of pressure and adaptation, where users are encouraged to regulate themselves in response to platform dynamics (Yang et al., 2025; Sun & Li, 2024).

4.3 Algorithmic opacity and perceived visibility disruption

This section examines algorithmic opacity, focusing on how creators experience and interpret visibility disruption, unexplained reach reductions and perceived shadow banning. As defined in Chapter 3, algorithmic opacity refers to the perceived lack of transparency and predictability in how Instagram's systems operate. In this context, sudden reductions in reach become particularly relevant because they make opacity visible through its effects: creators can observe declining engagement or reduced circulation, but they often cannot clearly identify why these changes occur.

In this context, shadow banning is approached not as a technically proven mechanism, but as a creator-facing interpretation of unexplained visibility reduction. The relevance of

the concept lies in the experience it captures: content remains available, yet appears to circulate less, reach fewer users or generate lower engagement without clear explanation. This makes shadow banning analytically useful for understanding how algorithmic opacity is experienced in practice.

The analysis therefore considers both the measurable occurrence of reach drops and their emotional consequences. Sudden visibility reductions reveal how creators interpret platform dynamics, while the psychological responses attached to these reductions show how algorithmic governance affects not only behavior but also stress, frustration and self-perception.

This perspective is important because it avoids treating shadow banning only as a technical question. For the purpose of this research, what matters is how creators experience and interpret unexplained visibility reduction, and how these interpretations shape their relationship with the platform. In this sense, shadow banning becomes a useful empirical lens for examining algorithmic opacity, perceived control and the emotional consequences of platform governance.

4.3.1 Algorithmic opacity: quantitative evidence of visibility reduction

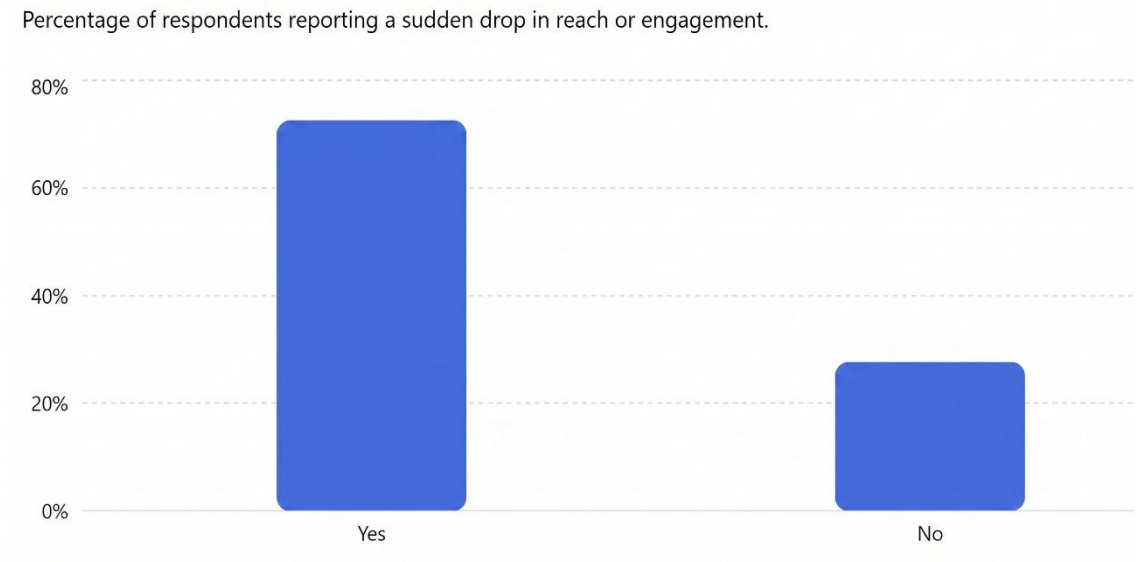
The following findings capture algorithmic opacity through creators' reported experiences of unexplained visibility reduction, unpredictable reach drops and uncertainty about their causes.

The results suggest that visibility disruption represents one of the most relevant and recurring experiences among the creators surveyed. A substantial majority of respondents, 73.1%, reported having experienced a sudden drop in reach or engagement. This finding is important because it shows that instability in visibility is not perceived as an isolated event, but as a common feature of participation on Instagram. For creators, reach is not simply a neutral metric: it represents access to audiences, potential collaborations, professional recognition and, in many cases, income opportunities. Therefore, when

visibility suddenly decreases, the effect is not limited to the performance of a single post, but can influence the broader conditions under which creators work and evaluate their own success.

Figure 3 shows the proportion of respondents who reported experiencing sudden reductions in reach or engagement.

Figure 3: Reported experience of sudden reach reductions



Source: Author's elaboration based on survey data (2026).

The experience of reach reduction appears to be mostly intermittent rather than constant. Among those who reported visibility drops, 71.1% described them as happening “sometimes”, while 18.4% experienced them rarely and 10.5% often. No respondent indicated that these drops occur very often. This pattern is particularly meaningful because it suggests that creators do not experience visibility reduction as a stable or permanent condition, but as an irregular disruption. Precisely because these drops occur occasionally, they become more difficult to interpret. A constant decline could perhaps be explained through a stable change in audience interest or content strategy, whereas intermittent drops create ambiguity: creators may struggle to understand whether the cause lies in the content itself, audience behavior, changes in the algorithm or hidden platform intervention.

This uncertainty also emerges in relation to the duration of visibility drops. More than half of respondents described their duration as unpredictable (55.3%), while smaller shares reported drops lasting one to two days, three to seven days or more than a week. The predominance of unpredictability is one of the most significant findings in this subsection. It shows that creators do not only lack certainty about why visibility decreases, but also about how long these decreases will last. In practical terms, this means that creators are required to continue producing, posting and adapting content without knowing whether the decline in reach is temporary, structural or connected to specific platform dynamics. Uncertainty therefore becomes part of the everyday experience of working on Instagram.

The uncertainty associated with visibility disruption also emerges from the open-ended responses. One respondent observed that “sometimes I feel that my stories have a very low reach and I don’t know why.” Although brief, this comment captures the core of algorithmic opacity: the creator can observe the outcome, namely reduced visibility, but cannot identify the mechanism that produced it. This gap between visible effects and unclear causes helps explain why reach drops are experienced not only as performance fluctuations, but as signs of a platform logic that remains difficult to interpret.

These descriptive indicators provide evidence of visibility disruption, but they were not included in the composite measure of algorithmic opacity because they are not Likert-scale items. Instead, the composite variable was calculated using the Likert-scale items measuring both general algorithmic opacity and perceived visibility disruption, namely Q11–Q14 and Q18–Q22.

The composite score for algorithmic opacity is 3.37, with a standard deviation of 0.74. This suggests that respondents moderately perceive Instagram as opaque and difficult to predict. The value is lower than perceived algorithmic control, but still above the neutral midpoint, indicating that opacity is a relevant component of creators’ platform experience.

The same ambiguity is reflected in how creators explain these drops. The most common interpretation is linked to algorithmic change, selected by 40.4% of respondents. Other explanations refer to content quality, lack of audience interest, posting time, sensitive or

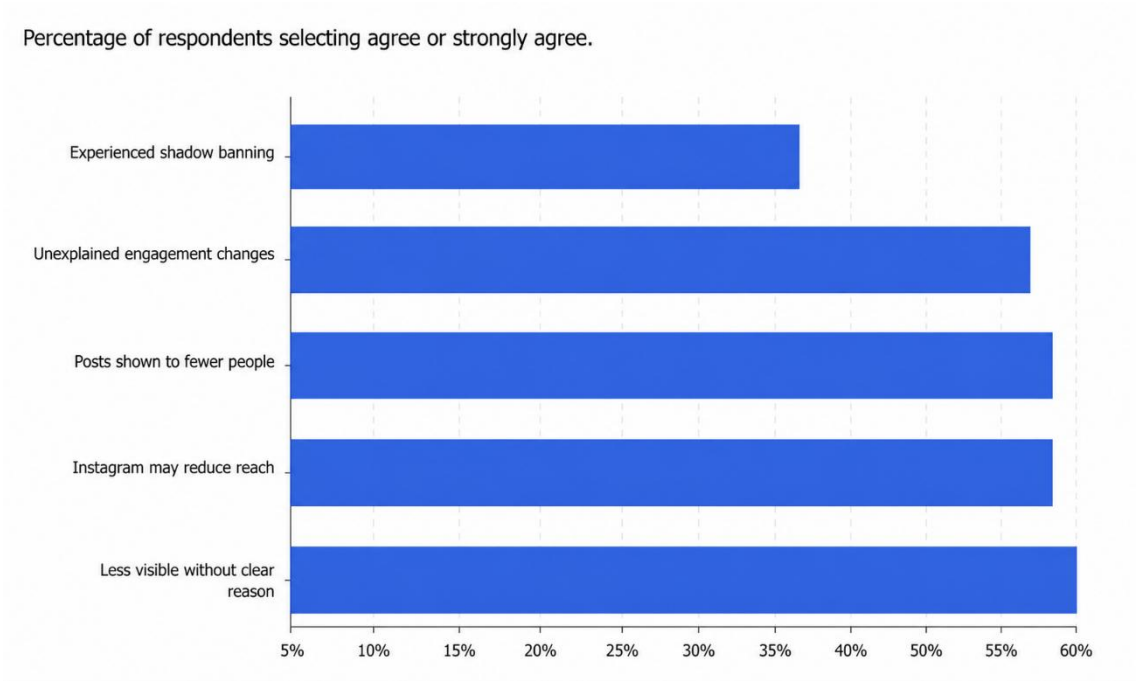
controversial topics, while a relevant share of respondents selected “I don’t know”. This distribution is revealing because it shows that creators do not rely on a single explanation for visibility loss. However, the algorithm remains the dominant interpretative frame. Even when the actual cause cannot be verified, creators tend to understand fluctuations in reach through the logic of platform change. This suggests that Instagram’s algorithm is not only a technical system that distributes visibility, but also a central reference point through which creators interpret success, decline and uncertainty.

The perception of hidden or unexplained visibility reduction becomes even clearer when considering the broader pattern of responses. More than half of the sample perceives some form of reduced visibility that cannot be easily explained: 59.6% indicate that content can become less visible without a clear reason, 55.8% believe that Instagram may reduce the reach of posts, 54.0% notice sudden changes in engagement that are difficult to explain and 55.8% feel that some posts are shown to fewer people than usual. Taken together, these results suggest that creators do not simply experience lower reach as a normal fluctuation of audience interest. For many of them, reduced visibility is connected to opaque platform dynamics that are difficult to observe, verify or contest.

At the same time, the explicit identification of these experiences as shadow banning is more contested. While 40.4% of respondents state that they have experienced shadow banning, 48.1% disagree and 11.5% remain neutral. This contrast is analytically important because it shows a gap between the experience of unexplained visibility reduction and the use of the specific term “shadow banning”. In other words, creators may experience the effects commonly associated with shadow banning without necessarily adopting the label. This may reflect different levels of familiarity with the term, different interpretations of what counts as shadow banning, or caution in attributing intentionality to the platform. For this reason, shadow banning should be treated less as a fixed technical category and more as a contested interpretation of reduced visibility.

Figure 4 presents the main indicators of algorithmic opacity, showing that unexplained visibility reduction is more widely reported than the explicit experience of shadow banning.

Figure 4: Perceived visibility reduction and shadow banning



Source: Author's elaboration based on survey data (2026).

Overall, the central empirical finding is that creators frequently experience visibility as unstable, opaque and difficult to explain. The survey does not demonstrate the technical existence of shadow banning, but it clearly shows that the conditions associated with it are meaningful for creators. The gap between the broader perception of unexplained visibility reduction and the more limited explicit identification of shadow banning is especially important. It suggests that shadow banning functions less as a universally shared technical label and more as one possible language through which creators interpret uncertainty.

This interpretation strengthens the broader argument of the thesis. Instagram's control is not experienced only through visible rules, formal sanctions or explicit moderation decisions, but also through fluctuations in visibility that creators cannot fully understand. In this sense, reduced reach becomes a form of perceived algorithmic signal: it tells creators that something may have changed, but not what has changed or why. This ambiguity places creators in a position of interpretative dependence, where they must continuously infer the meaning of platform outcomes without access to the underlying

decision-making processes. This is consistent with the broader problem of algorithmic opacity, where users observe outcomes but cannot fully identify whether they are produced by audience behavior, content performance, algorithmic change or platform intervention (Mittelstadt et al., 2016).

Visibility reduction therefore represents a key empirical example of how algorithmic governance is experienced at the user level. The platform does not need to issue an explicit sanction for creators to feel affected by its control mechanisms. A sudden decline in reach, especially when unexplained and unpredictable, can influence how creators evaluate their content, adjust their strategies and understand their position within the platform. The following subsection develops this point further by examining the psychological implications of invisible or unexplained visibility reduction, focusing on frustration, stress, anxiety and self-doubt among creators.

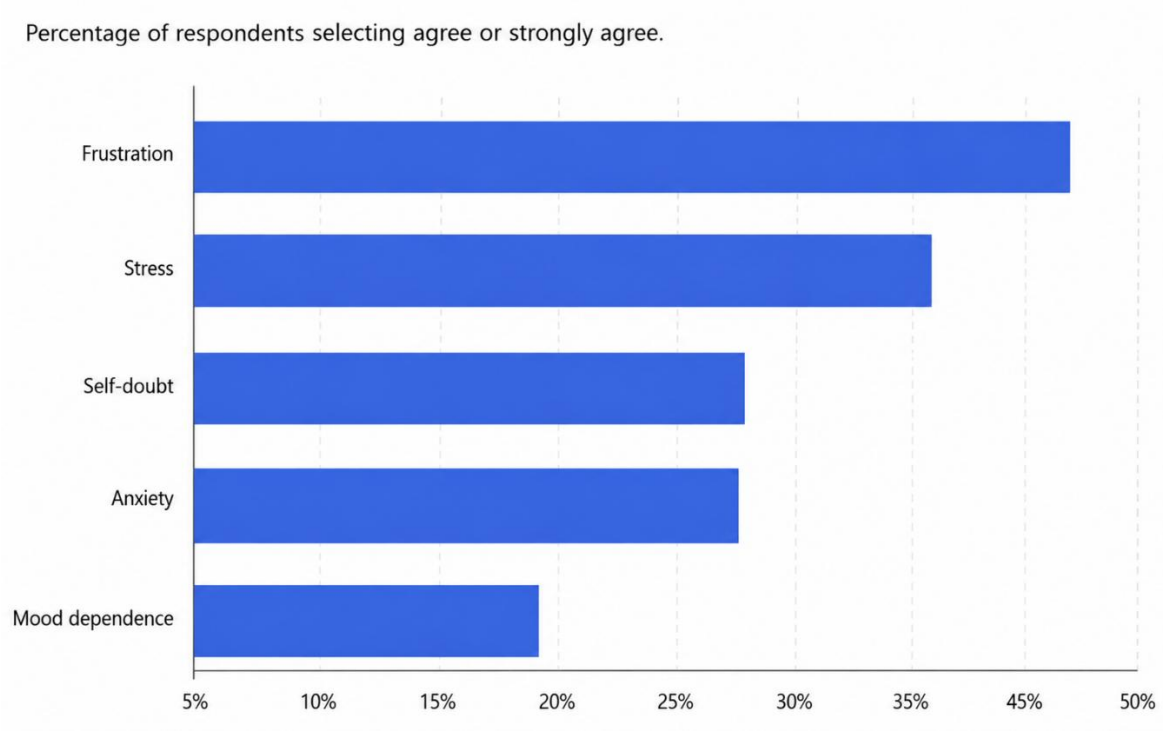
4.3.2 Algorithmic anxiety: perceived visibility reduction and reach suppression

This subsection examines algorithmic anxiety, understood as the emotional response generated by visibility fluctuations, performance uncertainty and perceived algorithmic evaluation. For creators, unexplained drops in reach are not only interpreted as technical fluctuations, but also as signals that may affect their confidence, motivation and relationship with the platform. This is why visibility reduction can be understood as a form of "invisible" punishment: it does not necessarily appear as a formal sanction, yet it can still generate emotional pressure because creators perceive that their content is being evaluated, limited or deprioritized without a clear explanation.

The composite score for algorithmic anxiety is 2.92, with a standard deviation of 1.04. This indicates that emotional responses to platform dynamics are present but less widespread than perceptions of control or opacity. The higher standard deviation suggests that psychological impact varies considerably across respondents.

Figure 5 summarizes the main indicators of algorithmic anxiety, including frustration, stress, anxiety, self-doubt and mood dependence.

Figure 5: Psychological effects of visibility reduction



Source: Author's elaboration based on survey data (2026).

The most evident emotional consequence is frustration. Almost half of the sample (46.2%) reported feeling frustrated when engagement drops. This result is significant because frustration reflects the difficulty of acting within a system whose outcomes are not fully understandable. Creators invest time, creativity and effort into content production, but when performance suddenly declines without a clear reason, the relationship between effort and outcome becomes unstable. In this sense, frustration is not simply a reaction to poor numbers; it reflects the perceived lack of control over the mechanisms that determine visibility.

Stress also emerges as an important consequence of algorithmic visibility dynamics. A considerable share of respondents (40.4%) reported feeling stressed about maintaining visibility on Instagram. This suggests that visibility is experienced as something that must be continuously sustained rather than passively obtained. The pressure to remain present,

active and responsive reinforces the idea that creator work is shaped by ongoing performance expectations. This result connects directly to the notion of platform labour, where users are required to continuously adapt to opaque and changing systems in order to maintain access to opportunities (Scholz, 2012; Duffy, 2021).

Anxiety and self-doubt are less widespread than frustration and stress, but they remain meaningful. More than a quarter of the sample (28.8%) associated poor content performance with anxiety, and the same share reported moments of self-doubt linked to low engagement. These findings suggest that, for part of the sample, visibility metrics influence not only strategic decisions but also self-perception. Low engagement may be interpreted as a sign of poor content quality or personal failure, even when the actual causes may be related to platform dynamics that creators cannot fully observe or control.

Mood dependence appears to be the weakest emotional indicator, with 19.2% of respondents stating that their mood is influenced by content performance. This lower percentage prevents an overly dramatic interpretation of the data. The findings do not suggest that all creators are emotionally overwhelmed by Instagram metrics. Rather, they show a more nuanced picture: visibility fluctuations generate frustration and stress for a substantial share of respondents, while deeper emotional effects such as anxiety, self-doubt and mood dependence affect a smaller but still relevant group.

This pattern may also reflect the composition of the sample, which is largely made up of experienced creators who monetize their Instagram activity at least occasionally. Experience may help creators manage performance fluctuations with greater distance, reducing the emotional intensity of poor outcomes. However, this does not mean that visibility drops are irrelevant. Even experienced creators appear affected by the uncertainty of unexplained reach reductions, especially when visibility is connected to collaborations, audience growth and professional opportunities.

The findings therefore show that the psychological impact of visibility reduction is not uniform, but differentiated. The most common effects are frustration and stress, while anxiety and self-doubt appear less generalized. This distinction is analytically important because it shows that algorithmic control does not affect all creators in the same way. Its

emotional consequences depend on how creators interpret visibility fluctuations, how dependent they are on Instagram and how strongly they connect performance metrics to professional or personal value.

These results suggest that algorithmic control operates not only through behavioral adaptation, but also through emotional and interpretative pressure. Creators are required to make sense of performance outcomes that may be sudden, unstable and unexplained. When visibility decreases without clear feedback, the platform does not need to issue an explicit punishment for creators to experience pressure. The uncertainty itself becomes consequential, encouraging creators to monitor their performance, question their strategies and adjust their behavior.

This connects with the wider literature on digital and platform labour, where workers often operate in systems that depend on their continuous activity while offering limited transparency about how outcomes are produced. In these environments, performance metrics are not neutral indicators but become part of the labour process, shaping how individuals evaluate their work and themselves (Mittelstadt et al., 2016). For Instagram creators, reach, engagement and visibility function in a similar way: they measure performance, but they also generate emotional consequences when they fluctuate unpredictably.

Overall, the data suggest that unexplained visibility reduction produces a moderate but meaningful psychological impact. The clearest effects are frustration and stress, while anxiety, self-doubt and mood dependence are less widespread but still present. This supports a nuanced interpretation of shadow banning and visibility disruption: their importance lies not only in whether they can be technically verified, but in how they are experienced and internalized by creators. When visibility declines without explanation, creators are pushed to interpret the platform's signals, question their own performance and adjust their behavior accordingly. In this sense, algorithmic control operates not only by shaping what creators do, but also by influencing how they evaluate themselves, their work and their position within the Instagram environment.

4.4 Behavioral responses: compliance and resistance

This section examines behavioral responses to perceived algorithmic control and algorithmic opacity. As defined in Chapter 3, behavioral responses refer to the ways in which creators adapt to, negotiate with or attempt to work around platform control. The findings show that creators do not respond to Instagram's algorithmic governance in a single way. Some responses reflect compliance, adaptation and caution, while others point to attempts to regain agency through alternative strategies.

For analytical clarity, behavioral responses are examined as two separate dimensions: behavioral compliance and behavioral resistance/adaptation. This distinction is important because the two dimensions capture different forms of response to algorithmic governance. Compliance refers to alignment with perceived platform expectations, while resistance/adaptation refers to attempts to work around or manage platform constraints.

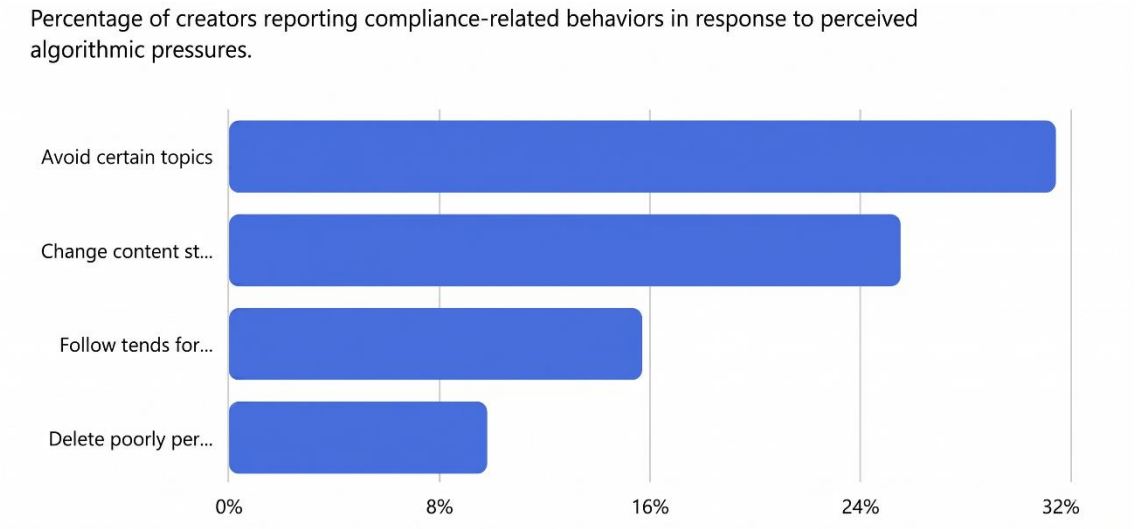
4.4.1 Behavioral responses I: compliance and self-censorship

The first dimension of behavioral responses concerns compliance, understood as the adaptation of content strategies, posting choices or self-presentation in order to reduce perceived risks and maintain visibility.

The results show that this form of compliance exists, but it is neither total nor automatic. Creators do not appear to simply obey every signal produced by the platform; rather, they selectively adjust their behavior when they perceive that visibility, reputation or professional opportunities may be at risk. Compliance therefore emerges less as direct obedience and more as a process of anticipation, in which creators evaluate what the platform might reward, ignore or penalize.

Figure 6 illustrates the compliance-related behavioral responses reported by creators, including strategy adaptation, trend-following, post deletion and topic avoidance.

Figure 6: Compliance and self-censorship behaviors



Source: Author's elaboration based on survey data (2026).

This selective adaptation is visible in the relationship between metrics and content strategy. Around one quarter of respondents (25.0%) reported changing their content strategy based on performance metrics, while almost half (48.1%) disagreed. Metrics clearly matter, but they do not fully dominate creative decision-making. Reach, views and engagement act as signals that creators observe and interpret, yet they do not automatically become commands. The platform provides feedback, but creators decide whether and how to incorporate it into their practices.

A similar dynamic emerges in relation to trends. Only 15.4% of respondents reported following trends mainly to increase visibility, while 51.9% disagreed. This result is particularly interesting because it contrasts with the widespread perception that Instagram favors specific formats such as Reels. Creators may recognize that the platform rewards certain forms of content, but this does not necessarily mean that they are willing to sacrifice their identity, niche or creative style in order to follow every trend. The data therefore reveal an important tension: creators are aware of platform pressures, but awareness does not necessarily translate into full conformity.

The limited tendency to delete poorly performing posts reinforces this interpretation. Only 9.6% of respondents reported deleting posts because they perform poorly, while

80.8% disagreed. This is one of the clearest findings in the section. It suggests that most creators do not allow engagement metrics to entirely determine the value of their content. A post may perform badly, but this does not necessarily mean that it loses meaning for the creator or should be removed from the profile. This finding challenges the idea that creators are completely governed by numbers. Instead, it suggests that many maintain a degree of distance from platform evaluation and continue to value content according to criteria that are not purely algorithmic.

Self-censorship becomes more visible when the focus shifts from past content to future content. 30.8% of respondents reported avoiding certain topics to prevent negative effects, while 25.0% remained neutral. This is the strongest compliance-related behavior in the subsection, and it reveals a more subtle form of platform influence. Creators may not frequently delete posts after poor performance, but some avoid topics in advance if they believe these could generate reduced visibility, controversy or negative platform reactions. Compliance therefore appears less as correction after failure and more as caution before action.

This anticipatory logic is central to understanding self-censorship on Instagram. When creators cannot fully predict how the platform will evaluate content, they may begin to regulate themselves before any visible consequence occurs. The crucial point is not whether Instagram objectively penalizes certain topics, but whether creators believe that some choices may expose them to risk. In this sense, uncertainty becomes behaviorally productive: it shapes decisions even in the absence of explicit rules or direct sanctions. The creator does not need to be told what to avoid; the possibility of reduced visibility is enough to encourage caution.

This anticipatory logic is also reflected in the open-ended responses. One respondent explained that “the social platform penalizes those who publish less and those who do not give continuity to their profile.” Whether or not such penalties objectively exist is less important than the perception that they may exist. The comment shows how creators internalize the expectation that continuity is necessary to remain visible, transforming posting frequency into a form of self-regulation.

The findings therefore point to a nuanced form of compliance. Creators are not passive subjects who simply obey the algorithm, but neither are they completely autonomous. They operate in an intermediate space where creativity, personal positioning and platform expectations must be constantly balanced. The relatively low levels of trend-following and post deletion indicate that creators preserve meaningful forms of agency. At the same time, the presence of topic avoidance shows that algorithmic uncertainty can influence what creators decide not to say, not to show or not to publish.

For this reason, compliance is most visible not in dramatic acts of submission to the algorithm, but in the quieter adjustments that precede publication. Instagram's influence is not only found in the content that creators produce, but also in the content they hesitate to produce. From a management control perspective, this means that algorithmic governance works through the internalization of risk. Creators monitor signals, anticipate possible consequences and adjust their behavior in order to protect visibility. This pattern reflects the broader condition of digital labour, where users are expected to remain adaptable and responsive within systems that provide limited transparency over how outcomes are generated (Scholz, 2012; Duffy, 2021).

All in all, the data show that compliance is selective, anticipatory and uneven. Metrics influence some creators, trends influence fewer, and poor performance rarely leads to deletion. However, the avoidance of potentially risky topics reveals a more subtle form of control, one that operates through expectation rather than instruction. In this sense, self-censorship becomes one of the clearest examples of how algorithmic control can shape creator behavior without appearing as direct coercion. The platform does not need to explicitly prohibit content for creators to begin adjusting themselves to what they believe the system may reward or punish.

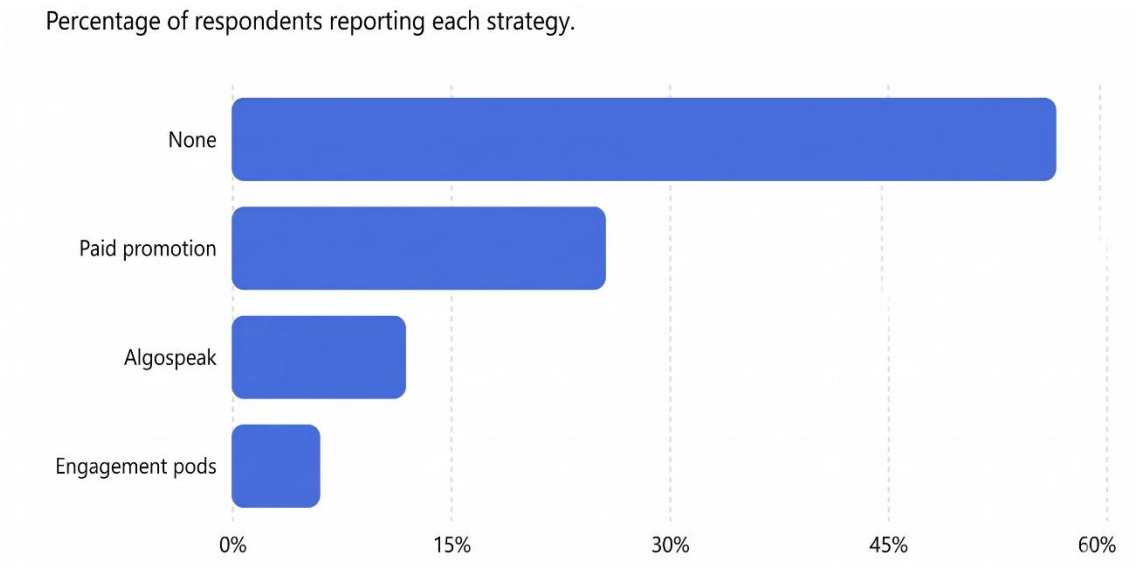
4.4.2 Behavioral responses II: resistance and adaptation strategies

The second dimension of behavioral responses concerns resistance, understood as the use of practical strategies to navigate, circumvent or reduce dependence on platform constraints.

Resistance appears in the data less as open opposition to Instagram and more as a set of practical attempts to recover control within an uncertain environment. Creators do not necessarily challenge the platform directly; rather, they experiment with ways of managing visibility, reducing dependence on unpredictable reach and protecting their presence from sudden changes in algorithmic distribution. In this sense, resistance is not always spectacular or explicit. It often takes the form of small adjustments, informal tactics and alternative routes to visibility.

Figure 7 summarizes the resistance and adaptation strategies reported by respondents.

Figure 7: Resistance and adaptation strategies



Source: Author's elaboration based on survey data (2026).

The overall pattern suggests that explicit resistance strategies remain relatively limited within the sample. More than half of the respondents (57.7%) indicated that they do not use any of the listed tactics, such as engagement pods, coded language or backup accounts. This does not mean that creators are unaffected by algorithmic uncertainty;

rather, it suggests that most of them continue to operate within the ordinary routines of the platform instead of relying on clearly identifiable strategies to bypass it. Resistance, therefore, appears as a selective response rather than a generalized condition.

Among the strategies that do appear, paid promotion is the most visible one, used by 25.0% of respondents. This is particularly interesting because paid promotion is not resistance in a strict sense. It does not oppose the platform; instead, it uses Instagram's official infrastructure to regain visibility. When organic reach becomes uncertain, some creators respond by converting visibility into an economic transaction. This shows how the platform can transform uncertainty into monetizable dependency: creators who struggle to reach audiences through ordinary distribution may pay to recover part of the visibility that the algorithm no longer guarantees.

More informal strategies are less common, but they reveal how some creators try to act within the gaps of the system. 11.5% of respondents reported using coded language, or "algospeak", by modifying words or captions to avoid reduced visibility or content restrictions. Even if this practice concerns a minority of the sample, it is analytically significant because it shows that some creators actively adjust their language in anticipation of possible platform filtering. In this case, resistance operates through adaptation: creators do not openly reject the platform's rules, but they reshape their communication to avoid being classified, limited or deprioritized by automated systems.

Engagement groups, or pods, are even less frequent, reported by 5.8% of respondents. These groups involve creators coordinating likes, comments, saves or shares in order to increase engagement and improve the perceived performance of content. The low percentage suggests that this is not a mainstream strategy within the sample. However, its presence remains meaningful because it shows that some creators attempt to influence the signals through which Instagram evaluates content. Rather than accepting engagement as a purely spontaneous audience reaction, they try to collectively produce it, turning platform metrics into something that can be strategically managed.

The absence of backup accounts is also relevant. No respondents reported using a secondary profile as a strategy to respond to visibility loss or platform restrictions. This

may suggest that creators in the sample do not generally perceive account restriction or visibility collapse as risks severe enough to require a backup presence. It may also reflect the professional nature of the sample: creators with established audiences, collaborations and recognizable personal brands may be less willing to fragment their identity across multiple accounts. For them, visibility is attached to a main profile, and moving attention elsewhere may be costly, confusing or strategically ineffective.

The broader statement on working around the algorithm adds an important layer to this interpretation. 19.2% of respondents agreed that they try to work around the algorithm when possible, while 42.3% remained neutral and 38.5% disagreed. The high level of neutrality is revealing because it suggests that many creators may not clearly define their actions as resistance. Experimenting with captions, formats, timing or engagement practices may be experienced as normal platform work rather than as an attempt to circumvent control. The boundary between adaptation and resistance is therefore blurred: what appears analytically as resistance may be lived by creators simply as part of staying visible.

The open-ended responses further illustrate how some creators develop informal tactics to manage visibility uncertainty. One respondent reported that “sometimes switching between a private and public profile seems to unblock the situation.” This comment is particularly interesting because it shows how creators construct practical theories about the platform and test them through experimentation. Such strategies do not directly challenge Instagram’s algorithmic control, but they represent attempts to regain a degree of agency within a system perceived as opaque and unpredictable.

This ambiguity is central to understanding creator behavior. In opaque platform environments, resistance rarely takes the form of direct confrontation. Instead, it often appears as experimentation, adjustment and tactical navigation. Creators may not reject Instagram’s rules, but they search for ways to make the system more predictable or less damaging. Paid promotion, algospeak and engagement pods all reflect different ways of responding to the same underlying problem: visibility is necessary, but its distribution is uncertain.

From the perspective of digital labour, these practices show that creator work extends beyond content production itself. Remaining visible requires additional forms of labour: interpreting platform signals, deciding whether to invest in paid reach, modifying language, coordinating engagement or evaluating alternative strategies. Much of this work is informal and often invisible, but it becomes necessary in a system where opportunities depend on performance metrics and algorithmic distribution (Scholz, 2012).

Overall, resistance strategies appear limited, fragmented and pragmatic. Most creators do not systematically attempt to bypass Instagram's algorithm, but some adopt specific tactics to manage uncertainty and protect visibility. Paid promotion, algospeak and engagement groups therefore show that resistance does not necessarily take the form of open opposition, but often emerges as tactical adaptation within the boundaries of the platform.

4.4.3 Reliability and descriptive statistics of composite variables

Before examining the relationships between variables, the internal consistency of the multi-item constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. This step was conducted to evaluate whether the items included in each composite variable measured the same underlying dimension.

Table 3 reports the Cronbach's alpha values for the composite variables used in the analysis. The results indicate good internal consistency for algorithmic opacity ($\alpha = 0.83$) and algorithmic anxiety ($\alpha = 0.89$). Perceived algorithmic control ($\alpha = 0.66$) and behavioral compliance ($\alpha = 0.63$) show moderate internal consistency. Although these values are slightly below the conventional threshold of 0.70, they can be considered acceptable in the context of an exploratory study with a relatively small sample and a limited number of items. Behavioral resistance/adaptation was not assessed through Cronbach's alpha because this dimension combines categorical strategy indicators with a Likert-scale item and was therefore treated as an exploratory behavioral index rather than a traditional multi-item scale.

Table 3: Reliability of composite variables

Variable	Cronbach's alpha
Perceived algorithmic control	0.66
Algorithmic opacity	0.83
Algorithmic anxiety	0.89
Behavioral compliance	0.63
Behavioral resistance/adaptation	Not applicable

Source: Author's elaboration based on survey data (2026).

After assessing reliability, descriptive statistics were calculated for the composite constructs developed from the survey items. Composite scores were obtained by averaging the relevant Likert-scale items associated with each construct. Behavioral resistance/adaptation was treated separately as an exploratory indicator, because it combines categorical strategy items with one Likert-scale item rather than forming a homogeneous multi-item scale.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics for composite variables

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation
Perceived algorithmic control	1.80	5.00	3.52	0.70
Algorithmic opacity	1.56	5.00	3.37	0.74
Algorithmic anxiety	1.00	5.00	2.92	1.04
Behavioral compliance	1.00	4.75	2.39	0.83
Behavioral resistance/ adaptation indicator	1.00	5.00	2.71	0.89

Source: Author's elaboration based on survey data (2026).

Table 4 presents the minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation values for the five composite variables used in the analysis. Perceived algorithmic control records the highest average score (M = 3.52, SD = 0.70), suggesting that respondents generally perceive Instagram as exerting a significant influence on visibility, performance and success.

Algorithmic anxiety records a more moderate average score (M = 2.92, SD = 1.04). The higher standard deviation suggests that emotional responses to platform dynamics vary more substantially across respondents. This indicates that frustration, stress and anxiety are present, but they are not experienced uniformly by all creators.

The two behavioral dimensions show different patterns. Behavioral compliance records the lowest mean score (M = 2.39, SD = 0.83), suggesting that creators do not systematically align their behavior with perceived platform expectations. Behavioral resistance/adaptation presents a slightly higher mean (M = 2.71, SD = 0.89), indicating that some creators engage in strategies aimed at managing visibility uncertainty, although these practices remain relatively limited across the sample.

Overall, the descriptive statistics suggest that perceptions of algorithmic influence and opacity are more widespread than either emotional distress or behavioral adaptation. This provides an important foundation for the following section, which examines how these variables relate to one another through correlation analysis.

4.5 Relationships between variables

To further examine how the main variables relate to one another, Pearson correlation coefficients (r) were calculated between the composite scores for perceived algorithmic control, algorithmic opacity, algorithmic anxiety, behavioral compliance and behavioral resistance/adaptation. Behavioral responses were separated into two dimensions because compliance and resistance/adaptation represent conceptually different ways of responding to platform governance. Compliance refers to alignment with perceived platform expectations, while resistance/adaptation refers to attempts to manage or work around algorithmic constraints.

Table 5 presents the correlation matrix between the five composite variables used in the analysis. The strongest relationship emerges between perceived algorithmic control and

algorithmic opacity (r = 0.642). This indicates that respondents who perceive Instagram as more influential in shaping visibility and success also tend to perceive the platform as more opaque and difficult to predict.

Behavioral compliance shows moderate positive correlations with perceived algorithmic control (r = 0.443) and algorithmic opacity (r = 0.412). This suggests that creators who perceive Instagram as more controlling or opaque are also more likely to adapt their behavior in line with perceived platform expectations.

Behavioral resistance/adaptation is also positively associated with perceived algorithmic control (r = 0.330) and algorithmic opacity (r = 0.450). This indicates that creators who experience the platform as influential and difficult to predict may also be more likely to experiment with strategies aimed at managing visibility uncertainty.

The relationship between algorithmic anxiety and the other variables appears weaker. Its correlations with perceived algorithmic control (r = 0.194), algorithmic opacity (r = 0.046), behavioral compliance (r = 0.328) and behavioral resistance/adaptation (r = 0.159) suggest that psychological impact is more differentiated and may depend on additional factors.

Table 5: Correlations between composite variables

Variables	Perceived algorithmic control	Algorithmic opacity	Algorithmic anxiety	Behavioral compliance	Behavioral resistance/ adaptation
Perceived algorithmic control	1.000	0.642	0.194	0.443	0.330
Algorithmic opacity	0.642	1.000	0.046	0.412	0.450
Algorithmic anxiety	0.194	0.046	1.000	0.328	0.159
Behavioral compliance	0.443	0.412	0.328	1.000	0.382
Behavioral resistance/ adaptation	0.330	0.450	0.159	0.382	1.000

Source: Author's elaboration based on survey data (2026).

Note: r represents the Pearson correlation coefficient and measures the strength and direction of the relationship between two variables.

Overall, the correlation analysis adds an important relational layer to the descriptive findings. Perceived algorithmic control and algorithmic opacity are closely connected, while behavioral compliance and behavioral resistance/adaptation clarify two different responses to platform governance. This distinction strengthens the analysis because creators may respond to algorithmic uncertainty either by adapting to perceived platform expectations or by experimenting with strategies to regain agency. Algorithmic anxiety, however, appears more differentiated and less directly connected to perceptions of control and opacity. These findings reveal a consistent tension between control and agency: creators recognize Instagram's influence, interpret unexplained visibility reductions and sometimes modify their behavior in response to perceived risks, yet they also preserve elements of creative autonomy and develop practical strategies to manage uncertainty.

4.5.1 Differences in the experience of algorithmic governance

While the previous sections examined the overall distribution of responses and the relationships between the main variables, this subsection explores whether perceptions of algorithmic governance differ across specific groups of creators. The analysis focuses on two factors that are particularly relevant to the theoretical framework of the thesis: prior experience of visibility loss and monetization status. Both dimensions are closely connected to platform dependence, since they indicate whether creators have directly experienced the consequences of unstable visibility and whether Instagram represents a source of economic or professional value.

The first comparison concerns creators who reported having experienced sudden visibility loss and those who did not. As shown in Table 6, respondents who experienced visibility loss report higher levels of perceived algorithmic control (M = 3.57) and algorithmic opacity (M = 3.49) than those who did not report such experiences. This suggests that visibility disruption may make platform influence more salient. When creators experience

an unexplained reduction in reach, Instagram is more likely to be perceived not only as influential, but also as difficult to understand and predict.

Interestingly, algorithmic anxiety is slightly higher among creators who did not report visibility loss (M = 3.16) than among those who did (M = 2.83). This finding prevents a deterministic interpretation of the relationship between visibility disruption and psychological impact. Emotional responses to platform governance do not appear to depend only on direct experiences of reach reduction. They may also be shaped by expectations, perceived vulnerability, professional aspirations or individual sensitivity to performance metrics.

Table 6: Average scores by experience of visibility loss

Variable	Experienced visibility loss	No experience of visibility loss
Perceived algorithmic control	3.57	3.37
Algorithmic opacity	3.49	3.07
Algorithmic anxiety	2.83	3.16

Source: Author's elaboration based on survey data (2026).

The second comparison focuses on monetization status. This dimension is relevant because, for monetized creators, visibility is not only a symbolic indicator of audience reach, but also a condition that may influence collaborations, professional opportunities and income. As shown in Table 7, monetized creators report higher levels of perceived algorithmic control (M = 3.57) and algorithmic opacity (M = 3.41) than non-monetized creators. This suggests that creators whose activity is connected to economic value may be more attentive to the platform mechanisms that shape reach and engagement.

However, algorithmic anxiety is slightly higher among non-monetized creators (M = 3.20) than among monetized creators (M = 2.88). This result is particularly interesting because it suggests that emotional pressure is not limited to creators who already monetize their activity. Creators who do not yet monetize may still experience anxiety because visibility is perceived as a condition for future growth, recognition or access to

professional opportunities. In this sense, platform dependence may operate not only through current income, but also through anticipated possibilities.

Table 7: Average scores by monetization status

Variable	Monetized creators	Non-monetized creators
Perceived algorithmic control	3.57	3.13
Algorithmic opacity	3.41	3.09
Algorithmic anxiety	2.88	3.20

Source: Author's elaboration based on survey data (2026).

Comparing the two sets of results, a consistent pattern emerges for perceived algorithmic control and algorithmic opacity. In both comparisons, creators who are more exposed to platform dependence, either because they have experienced visibility loss or because they monetize their activity, report higher average scores. This suggests that Instagram's algorithmic governance becomes more salient when visibility has direct consequences for creators' professional opportunities, income or perceived stability. By contrast, algorithmic anxiety follows a less linear pattern, as it is slightly higher among creators without reported visibility loss and among non-monetized creators. This indicates that emotional pressure may not depend only on direct economic dependence or past negative experiences, but may also be connected to expectations of future growth, perceived vulnerability and uncertainty about one's position within the platform.

Overall, these exploratory comparisons suggest that algorithmic governance is not experienced uniformly across creators. Prior experiences of visibility loss and monetization status are associated with higher perceptions of algorithmic control and opacity, indicating that creators who are more directly exposed to visibility disruption or economic dependence tend to perceive Instagram's governance mechanisms more strongly. At the same time, the patterns observed for algorithmic anxiety are less linear, suggesting that emotional responses to platform dynamics are shaped by broader factors than visibility loss or monetization alone. Although the relatively small sample size prevents broader generalization, these findings strengthen the empirical contribution of the chapter by showing that Instagram's influence is not only an abstract technical feature

of the platform, but a lived experience shaped by creators' different positions within the platform economy.

4.6 Qualitative insights: how creators experience algorithmic governance

While the previous sections presented the quantitative findings of the survey, the open-ended responses provide additional insight into how creators interpret and experience Instagram's algorithmic systems in their everyday activities. All responses to the final open-ended question (Q38) were reviewed and examined through an exploratory thematic lens. Although these comments do not constitute a formal qualitative dataset, they offer valuable contextual evidence that complements the statistical results and helps illustrate how creators make sense of algorithmic governance in practice.

A first recurring theme concerns the difficulty of understanding how Instagram's algorithm operates. Several respondents described visibility fluctuations as confusing and unpredictable, echoing the findings presented in Section 4.3 regarding algorithmic opacity. One respondent explained:

> *"Sometimes I feel that my stories have a very low reach and I don't know why."*

Although brief, this statement captures one of the central dynamics identified throughout the study. The creator is able to observe the outcome, namely reduced visibility, but lacks the information necessary to determine its cause. The comment reflects a condition in which platform decisions are experienced through their consequences rather than through transparent explanations. This finding reinforces the quantitative evidence showing that creators frequently struggle to interpret visibility fluctuations and often perceive platform governance as opaque and difficult to predict.

Interestingly, not all respondents interpreted algorithmic dynamics in the same way. One creator challenged the idea that Instagram intentionally restricts visibility, stating:

"The algorithm is people. Instagram has no interest in blocking you."

This response highlights the diversity of creator interpretations. While many respondents associated reduced visibility with algorithmic intervention, others emphasized the role of audience behavior and engagement patterns. The presence of alternative interpretations suggests that creators actively construct explanations for platform outcomes, often drawing on personal experience and informal knowledge rather than on official platform information. Taken together, these comments reinforce the idea that algorithmic opacity does not simply reflect a lack of information. Rather, it creates a space in which creators continuously interpret, question and negotiate the meaning of visibility outcomes.

A second theme concerns the relationship between visibility and creativity. Several comments suggest that creators perceive a tension between producing authentic content and adapting to what they believe the platform rewards. One respondent observed:

"Instagram's algorithm has a strong impact on visibility and sometimes makes authentic content harder to reach people. I still believe creativity, emotions and human connection should matter more than trends and numbers."

This statement is particularly significant because it reflects one of the central findings of the study. Throughout the survey, creators reported feeling pressure to adapt to platform-favored formats and posting practices, yet many remained reluctant to reduce success entirely to algorithmic performance. The comment therefore illustrates a broader tension between creative autonomy and platform dependency. Visibility is perceived as increasingly influenced by algorithmic systems, but creators continue to value authenticity and human connection as important dimensions of their work. This finding supports the interpretation developed in Section 4.2: Instagram's influence is not experienced simply as direct control, but as a system of incentives that encourages certain behaviors while leaving creators formally free to choose their content.

A final recurring theme concerns the practical strategies creators adopt in response to perceived algorithmic pressures. The comments suggest that uncertainty does not lead to passivity; rather, creators actively modify their behavior in an attempt to maintain visibility and reduce perceived risks. One respondent stated:

"The social platform penalizes those who publish less and those who do not give continuity to their profile."

Whether such penalties objectively exist is less important than the fact that creators believe they do. The statement illustrates how expectations regarding algorithmic rewards and punishments become internalized and translated into self-regulation. Posting regularly is not perceived merely as a content strategy, but as a requirement for remaining visible within the platform ecosystem.

Other respondents described more experimental approaches to managing uncertainty. For example, one creator reported:

"Sometimes switching between a private and public profile seems to unblock the situation."

This comment reveals how creators develop informal theories about how the platform operates and then test those theories through practical experimentation. Such strategies do not necessarily challenge Instagram's influence directly, but they represent attempts to regain a degree of agency within a system perceived as unpredictable. In this sense, creators do not simply comply with platform governance; they continuously negotiate with it through everyday practices of observation, adaptation and trial-and-error.

Overall, the qualitative responses reinforce the main findings of the quantitative analysis while adding a more nuanced understanding of how algorithmic governance is experienced in practice. The comments reveal that creators do not perceive Instagram merely as a neutral technological infrastructure. Instead, they describe it as an active force that shapes visibility, influences creative choices and requires ongoing adaptation. Most importantly, the responses show that algorithmic control is experienced not only through measurable outcomes such as reach and engagement, but also through the meanings creators attach to those outcomes. The qualitative evidence therefore strengthens the central argument of this chapter: Instagram's influence operates through a combination of visibility management, uncertainty and behavioral adaptation, making algorithmic governance a lived and interpreted experience rather than a purely technical process.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this thesis, Instagram has been examined not simply as a social media platform, but as a socio-technical environment that structures visibility, influences behavior and shapes the conditions under which creators operate. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 highlighted how algorithmic systems increasingly perform functions traditionally associated with management and control, while the empirical findings presented in Chapter 4 revealed how creators experience, interpret and respond to these dynamics in their everyday activities. Building on these insights, this final chapter discusses the extent to which Instagram can be understood as a managerial actor within the creator economy and reflects on the broader implications of this form of platform governance.

5.1 Answers to the research questions

This thesis was guided by three research questions concerning how Instagram creators perceive, experience and respond to algorithmic governance. The empirical findings allow each question to be addressed directly.

RQ1: How do Veneto-based content creators perceive and interpret algorithmic control within Instagram, particularly in relation to visibility and content distribution? The findings show that creators perceive Instagram as a platform that significantly influences visibility and content distribution through algorithmic mechanisms. Respondents generally recognize that reach and engagement are not determined only by audience interest or content quality, but are also shaped by platform systems, format-based incentives and performance metrics. The relatively high score for perceived algorithmic control indicates that creators experience Instagram as an environment that indirectly guides their activity, particularly through the perceived importance of Reels, posting frequency and visibility optimization. However, this control is not interpreted as

absolute. Many respondents continue to attribute success to creativity, content quality and personal strategy, suggesting that algorithmic control coexists with a continued sense of creative agency.

RQ2: How is the phenomenon of shadow banning perceived by creators and what effects does it have on their behavior, content strategies and psychological wellbeing? The results show that shadow banning is perceived less as a clearly verifiable technical mechanism and more as an interpretative framework through which creators make sense of unexplained visibility reduction. A large share of respondents reported sudden drops in reach or engagement, while fewer explicitly identified these experiences as shadow banning. This distinction suggests that creators may experience the effects associated with shadow banning without necessarily adopting the term itself. The psychological effects are moderate but meaningful: visibility drops generate frustration, stress, anxiety and self-doubt for part of the sample. These findings indicate that the significance of shadow banning lies not only in whether it can be technically proven, but in how unexplained visibility loss shapes creators' perceptions, emotions and strategic decisions.

RQ3: How do creators respond to algorithmic opacity? Do they primarily comply with perceived platform logics or do they develop forms of resistance and alternative strategies?

The findings suggest that creators respond to algorithmic opacity through a combination of selective compliance and pragmatic adaptation. Compliance is visible in practices such as changing content strategies, avoiding certain topics and adjusting behavior in anticipation of possible visibility consequences. However, these behaviors are not universal, and the descriptive statistics show that behavioral compliance remains lower than perceived control and opacity. Resistance/adaptation strategies, such as paid promotion, algospeak and engagement groups, are also present but limited. Rather than fully complying with or directly resisting Instagram, creators appear to negotiate with the platform through everyday practices of monitoring, experimentation and adjustment. This confirms the central tension identified in the thesis: Instagram shapes the conditions of creator activity, but creators continue to exercise agency within those constraints.

5.2 Discussion: is Instagram a “manager”?

Taken together, the findings of this study indicate that Instagram performs many of the functions traditionally associated with management, despite the absence of a formal employment relationship between the platform and creators. Instagram does not assign tasks, supervise creators directly or establish contractual performance targets in the way a traditional manager would. Nevertheless, it influences what content is produced, how frequently creators post, how success is evaluated and how opportunities for visibility are distributed. In this sense, Instagram can be understood not simply as a technological intermediary, but as a managerial actor whose influence is exercised through algorithms, visibility systems and performance metrics.

This interpretation is supported by the empirical evidence gathered through the survey. Creators largely perceive Instagram as a platform that structures visibility through algorithmic mechanisms rather than through audience demand alone. The strong perception that the algorithm influences content visibility, combined with the pressure to post frequently and adapt to platform-favored formats such as Reels, suggests that creators experience Instagram as an environment that indirectly guides their work practices. The platform does not need to explicitly tell creators what to produce; instead, it shapes the conditions under which certain forms of content appear more likely to succeed. This reflects a form of algorithmic management in which control operates through continuous evaluation, ranking and feedback rather than direct supervision (Kellogg et al., 2020; Duggan et al., 2023).

The descriptive statistics and correlation analysis further support this interpretation. Perceived algorithmic control emerged as the strongest variable in the dataset, while the correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between perceived algorithmic control and algorithmic opacity. This suggests that creators experience Instagram’s influence as particularly powerful when the mechanisms governing visibility remain difficult to predict and interpret.

The managerial role of Instagram becomes particularly visible in the relationship between visibility and value. For creators, visibility is not only a symbolic outcome but a condition

that affects audience growth, collaboration opportunities and potential monetization. By controlling the systems through which visibility is allocated, Instagram indirectly structures the economic and professional possibilities available to creators. This means that the platform does not simply host creator labour; it actively organizes the environment in which such labour becomes valuable. The findings therefore support the idea that platform organizations exercise control not only by setting rules, but also by shaping access to markets, audiences and opportunities (van Dijck et al., 2018; Vallas & Schor, 2020).

At the same time, Instagram's managerial power differs from traditional organizational control because it is largely indirect, opaque and infrastructural. Traditional managers usually exercise authority through identifiable decisions, formal evaluation criteria and explicit communication. By contrast, Instagram governs through systems whose logic is only partially accessible to creators. The findings on unexplained reach reductions and shadow banning show that creators often experience visibility as unstable and difficult to interpret. Even when they cannot verify whether reduced visibility results from audience behavior, content performance or algorithmic intervention, the uncertainty itself becomes meaningful. It pushes creators to monitor signals, question their strategies and adjust their behavior in anticipation of possible platform effects.

This is one of the most important implications of the study. Instagram's control does not depend only on actual algorithmic decisions, but also on how creators perceive and interpret those decisions. The experience of shadow banning, for example, is analytically relevant not because it proves the existence of a specific technical mechanism, but because it reveals how creators make sense of unexplained visibility loss. When creators believe that visibility can be reduced without clear explanation, they may begin to adapt their behavior before any explicit sanction occurs. In this sense, opacity becomes a mechanism of control, because it encourages self-monitoring, experimentation and precautionary behavior (Mittelstadt et al., 2016; Cotter, 2023).

The findings on psychological impact further reinforce this interpretation. Frustration, stress, anxiety and self-doubt show that algorithmic governance affects not only what creators do, but also how they experience and evaluate their work. Performance metrics

such as reach and engagement are not neutral indicators; they become part of the labour process, shaping creators' sense of success, competence and control. This supports broader research on digital labour, which argues that platform work often requires continuous adaptation within systems that provide limited transparency and uncertain rewards (Scholz, 2012). Instagram therefore performs a managerial function not only by influencing behavior, but also by shaping the emotional and interpretative conditions of creator labour.

However, the findings do not suggest that creators are completely controlled by Instagram. A central result of the study is the coexistence of control and agency. Many respondents recognize the influence of the algorithm, but they do not fully reduce success to algorithmic performance. Similarly, compliance behaviors such as adapting content strategy or avoiding certain topics are present, but they are selective rather than universal. Resistance strategies, including paid promotion, algospeak and engagement groups, remain limited, yet they show that creators do not simply accept platform control passively. Instead, they negotiate with Instagram through everyday practices that combine adaptation, caution and experimentation.

This tension between control and agency is essential for answering the central question of the thesis. Instagram functions as a manager, but not as an all-powerful or traditional manager. Its authority is not based on direct commands, formal employment relations or explicit supervision. Rather, it operates by structuring the conditions under which creators pursue visibility, recognition and economic value. Creators remain formally autonomous, but their autonomy is exercised within an environment shaped by algorithmic evaluation, visibility incentives and opaque platform dynamics. As a result, Instagram does not eliminate creator agency; it reorganizes the space in which that agency can be exercised.

From a management control perspective, this finding is significant because it shows that control in platform organizations extends beyond the boundaries of formal employment. Instagram demonstrates how managerial functions can be distributed across technical systems, metrics and interface design, producing behavioral alignment without direct hierarchical authority. This challenges traditional understandings of management control that focus primarily on organizations, managers and employees. In platform contexts,

control is enacted through infrastructures that evaluate, reward and discipline users while preserving the appearance of autonomy and voluntary participation.

From the perspective of platform governance theory, the study also shows that governance is not only a matter of rules, moderation or content policies. It is also a matter of visibility allocation. Instagram governs creators by determining the conditions under which content becomes visible, discoverable and economically valuable. This form of governance is hybrid: formal rules define the boundaries of acceptable behavior, while algorithmic systems shape the distribution of attention and opportunity. The empirical findings confirm that creators experience this hybrid governance not as a purely technical process, but as an everyday condition that affects their strategies, emotions and perceptions of success.

Therefore, Instagram can be understood as a de facto manager of creator labour because it performs key managerial functions without appearing as a traditional managerial authority. It evaluates performance through metrics, directs behavior through visibility incentives, disciplines users through uncertainty and shapes access to economic opportunities through algorithmic distribution. At the same time, creators remain active participants in this process, interpreting signals, adapting selectively and developing strategies to manage uncertainty. The central conclusion is therefore not that Instagram fully controls creators, but that it manages the conditions under which creator labour is organized, valued and made visible.

5.3 Theoretical and managerial implications

The findings of this study contribute to the growing literature on algorithmic management by extending its application beyond the contexts most commonly examined in previous research. Existing studies have largely focused on platform workers operating within gig economy environments, where algorithms allocate tasks, monitor performance and

evaluate workers through data-driven systems (Kellogg et al., 2020; Duggan et al., 2023). The results presented in this thesis suggest that similar mechanisms are also present within the creator economy, despite the absence of formal employment relationships between platforms and creators. Instagram does not assign tasks, establish working schedules or directly supervise users. Nevertheless, it shapes the conditions under which visibility, audience growth and economic opportunities become attainable. In this sense, the study supports the argument that algorithmic management should be understood not as a phenomenon limited to traditional forms of platform work, but as a broader system of governance capable of influencing a wide range of digital labour activities.

A particularly important theoretical contribution concerns the relationship between autonomy and dependence. Content creators are often described as independent actors who enjoy considerable freedom regarding what they produce, how they present themselves and when they publish content. The findings partly support this interpretation, as creators do not appear to perceive themselves as fully controlled by the platform. At the same time, however, their opportunities for visibility and growth remain strongly dependent on algorithmic systems that they neither design nor control. This creates a condition in which autonomy and dependence coexist rather than exclude one another. Creators retain freedom over content production, yet the value of that content is significantly influenced by platform infrastructures that determine how, when and to whom content is distributed. The study therefore reinforces recent scholarship suggesting that digital labour is increasingly characterized by forms of autonomy that operate within conditions of structural platform dependency (Cotter, 2023; Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

The findings also contribute to debates surrounding algorithmic opacity and control. Previous research has frequently treated these concepts as related but distinct dimensions of platform governance (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2018). The results of this study suggest that, from the perspective of creators, opacity and control are experienced as deeply interconnected. The correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between perceived algorithmic control and algorithmic opacity, indicating that creators often perceive Instagram as influential precisely because its mechanisms remain difficult to interpret. Control therefore emerges not only through algorithmic outcomes themselves,

but also through uncertainty regarding how those outcomes are produced. This finding supports the argument that opacity should not be understood merely as a lack of information, but as a structural characteristic of algorithmic governance that encourages continuous monitoring, experimentation and behavioral adaptation.

A further contribution emerges from the relationship between knowledge and anxiety. Although respondents reported moderate levels of perceived understanding of platform dynamics, algorithmic anxiety remained relatively high across the sample. This suggests that familiarity with algorithmic systems does not necessarily eliminate uncertainty. Instead, creators appear to develop practical knowledge that enables adaptation without providing complete confidence regarding future outcomes. Even experienced users continue to face unpredictability concerning reach, engagement and visibility. The findings therefore support broader arguments within digital labour research that uncertainty is not simply a temporary condition resulting from insufficient knowledge, but an enduring feature of work organized through algorithmic systems (Wood et al., 2019). From this perspective, algorithmic anxiety should be understood not only as an emotional response to negative outcomes, but also as a consequence of operating within environments where evaluation criteria remain partially inaccessible.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, the study also offers practical implications for creators, brands and platform designers.

For creators, the findings highlight the importance of recognizing both the opportunities and limitations associated with algorithmic visibility. While adapting to platform dynamics may increase reach and engagement, excessive dependence on algorithmic performance can generate frustration and uncertainty. The results suggest that creators may benefit from adopting diversified strategies that reduce reliance on a single platform, strengthen direct relationships with audiences and prioritize sustainable content practices over constant optimization. Such approaches may help mitigate some of the pressures associated with visibility fluctuations while preserving greater creative autonomy.

For brands and organizations working with creators, the findings emphasize the need to interpret performance metrics with caution. Reach, engagement and visibility are often

treated as indicators of creator effectiveness, yet the results of this study demonstrate that these outcomes are influenced not only by content quality or audience preferences, but also by platform dynamics that remain largely outside creators' control. Evaluating creators exclusively through quantitative performance indicators may therefore overlook important contextual factors. A more comprehensive approach should consider audience relationships, content relevance and long-term value creation alongside short-term engagement metrics.

Finally, the findings carry important implications for platform designers and policy discussions concerning platform governance. The prevalence of perceived opacity and algorithmic anxiety suggests that creators would benefit from greater transparency regarding the mechanisms that influence content distribution and visibility. Complete transparency may be neither technically feasible nor commercially desirable. However, clearer communication regarding performance metrics, recommendation systems and significant algorithmic updates could reduce uncertainty and improve users' ability to make informed decisions. In this respect, the study supports emerging calls for more transparent and accountable forms of algorithmic governance that balance platform objectives with the well-being of those whose work depends upon them (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2021).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that algorithmic management within the creator economy operates through mechanisms that differ from those commonly associated with traditional employment or gig work. Rather than relying on direct supervision, Instagram influences creators through visibility allocation, performance metrics and partially opaque systems of evaluation. The platform therefore governs not by explicitly directing behaviour, but by shaping the conditions under which visibility, recognition and economic opportunities are achieved. Understanding this form of governance is essential not only for advancing academic debates on algorithmic management, but also for addressing the practical challenges increasingly faced by creators operating within platform-mediated environments.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into how creators perceive and experience algorithmic governance on Instagram, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the study relies on self-reported data. The findings therefore capture creators' perceptions, interpretations and experiences rather than the actual functioning of Instagram's algorithmic systems. This distinction is particularly relevant in relation to phenomena such as shadow banning. The study does not seek to verify whether specific visibility reductions were objectively caused by algorithmic intervention. Instead, it examines how creators make sense of such experiences and how these perceptions influence their behavior, emotions and strategic decisions. As a result, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of perceived algorithmic governance rather than direct evidence of algorithmic processes.

Second, the study focuses exclusively on Instagram. Although Instagram represents one of the most relevant platforms within the creator economy, algorithmic governance may operate differently across platforms. TikTok, YouTube, Twitch and other social media platforms rely on distinct recommendation systems, monetization structures and visibility mechanisms. Consequently, the findings cannot be automatically generalized to the broader platform ecosystem.

Third, the empirical analysis is based on a relatively small sample of 52 creators recruited through the Veneto Creators Community. While the sample provides meaningful insights into creators' experiences, it does not allow for broad statistical generalization. In addition, the regional focus of the study may limit the extent to which the findings reflect the experiences of creators operating in different cultural, economic or institutional contexts. Furthermore, the group comparisons presented in Chapter 4 should be interpreted as exploratory patterns rather than statistically generalizable differences between creator categories.

A further limitation concerns the cross-sectional nature of the research design. Data were collected at a single point in time and therefore capture perceptions and experiences only within a specific period. Given the continuous evolution of platform policies,

recommendation systems and creator practices, perceptions of algorithmic governance may change over time. Longitudinal research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how creators adapt to evolving platform dynamics and how perceptions of control, opacity and anxiety develop across different stages of platform participation.

These limitations also suggest several avenues for future research. First, longitudinal studies could examine how creators' perceptions evolve following algorithm updates, policy changes or significant visibility disruptions. Such research would make it possible to observe whether perceptions of algorithmic control, opacity and anxiety remain stable over time or vary in response to platform developments. Second, comparative research across multiple platforms could identify whether the forms of algorithmic management observed on Instagram are platform-specific or represent broader characteristics of the creator economy. Comparing Instagram with platforms such as TikTok or YouTube would be particularly valuable in this regard.

Third, future studies could employ qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups or digital ethnography, to explore creators' experiences in greater depth. While surveys provide valuable information about general patterns and perceptions, qualitative approaches could offer richer insights into how creators interpret algorithmic governance in their everyday activities and how they develop coping strategies in response to uncertainty. Finally, future research could combine self-reported perceptions with platform analytics or performance metrics in order to examine the relationship between perceived algorithmic governance and observable visibility outcomes. Such an approach would help bridge the gap between creators' subjective experiences and the measurable effects of platform systems.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to the growing literature on algorithmic management, platform governance and digital labour by providing empirical evidence of how creators experience Instagram's influence in their everyday activities. The findings demonstrate that algorithmic governance is not only a technical process of content distribution, but also a social and interpretative phenomenon that shapes how creators understand visibility, success, autonomy and opportunity within the creator economy.

5.5 Final remarks

The rise of digital platforms has transformed not only how content is distributed, but also how work is organized, evaluated and governed. Within the creator economy, visibility has become a critical resource, and access to that resource is increasingly mediated by algorithmic systems. This thesis has examined how creators experience these dynamics on Instagram, focusing on perceptions of algorithmic control, opacity, anxiety and behavioral responses.

The empirical analysis shows that creators generally perceive Instagram as a platform that plays an active role in shaping visibility and success. While creators remain formally independent and retain important elements of creative autonomy, they operate within an environment structured by algorithmic evaluation, performance metrics and uncertain visibility dynamics. In this context, creators continuously interpret platform signals, adapt their strategies and negotiate the constraints associated with algorithmic governance.

A central contribution of the study is the recognition that Instagram's influence extends beyond technical content distribution. The platform shapes how creators understand success, evaluate performance and make decisions about their work. The findings therefore support the view that algorithmic governance functions not only as a technological process, but also as a form of organizational influence that structures opportunities, expectations and behavior. At the same time, the study demonstrates that creators are not passive recipients of platform control. Rather, they actively interpret, negotiate and respond to the conditions established by the platform, revealing a persistent tension between control and agency.

More broadly, this thesis contributes to ongoing debates on algorithmic management, platform governance and digital labour by showing how managerial functions can be exercised through visibility systems, recommendation algorithms and performance metrics, even in the absence of formal employment relationships. The study highlights that managerial influence can emerge through infrastructures that guide behavior, shape expectations and allocate opportunities without relying on direct supervision or formal authority. As digital platforms continue to expand their role in economic and social life,

understanding how these forms of governance are experienced by those who depend on them becomes increasingly important.

Ultimately, Instagram emerges not simply as a social media platform, but as a socio-technical environment that actively shapes the conditions under which creator labour is organized, valued and made visible. Although creators retain agency and continue to develop strategies to navigate platform dynamics, their activities unfold within a system where visibility, opportunity and recognition are increasingly mediated by algorithmic processes. Examining these dynamics is therefore essential not only for understanding the contemporary creator economy, but also for understanding the broader transformation of work, management and governance in the platform age.

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APPENDIX I

INSTAGRAM CREATORS & ALGORITHMIC CONTROL'S SURVEY

This survey is part of a Master's thesis exploring how Instagram creators perceive and respond to visibility changes, algorithm dynamics and content performance.

The questionnaire is anonymous and will take approximately 5 minutes. Your responses will be used only for academic purposes.

Thank you for your participation!

SECTION 1 – CREATOR PROFILE

This section collects basic information about your Instagram activity and creator profile.

Q1. How many followers do you have on Instagram?

- Less than 1,000 (Nano)
- 1,000 – 10,000 (Micro)
- 10,000 – 100,000 (Mid-tier)
- More than 100,000 (Macro)

Q2. How often do you post content?

- Daily
- 3–5 times per week
- 1–2 times per week
- Less than once per week

Q3. What type of content do you mainly create?

- Lifestyle
- Fashion/Beauty
- Fitness
- Food
- Travel

- Education
- Entertainment
- Other: _____

Q4. How long have you been actively creating content on Instagram?

- Less than 6 months
- 6 months – 1 year
- 1–3 years
- More than 3 years

Q5. Do you earn money directly or indirectly from your Instagram activity?

- Yes, regularly
- Yes, occasionally
- Not currently, but I would like to
- No

SECTION 2 – PERCEIVED ALGORITHMIC CONTROL

This section explores whether and how Instagram's algorithm influences your visibility and content strategy.

On a scale from 1 to 5: 1 = Strongly disagree | 5 = Strongly agree

Q6. Instagram's algorithm strongly influences what content becomes visible.
Q7. I feel pressured to post frequently to remain visible.
Q8. I feel that I must adapt my content to what the algorithm prefers.
Q9. Instagram favors certain formats (e.g., Reels over photos).
Q10. My success depends more on the algorithm than on my creativity.

SECTION 3 – ALGORITHMIC OPACITY

This section examines how clear or unclear Instagram's algorithm feels to you.

On a scale from 1 to 5: 1 = Strongly disagree | 5 = Strongly agree

Q11. It is difficult to predict how my content will perform.
Q12. I often don't understand why my content performs well or poorly.

Q13. I rely on trial-and-error to understand what works.
Q14. I learn how to grow mainly from other creators or online advice.

SECTION 4 – SHADOW BANNING & VISIBILITY

This section focuses on experiences of reduced visibility or unexplained drops in reach.

*In this section, **shadow banning** means a situation where a post or account becomes less visible — for example, fewer views, lower reach, or less engagement — without a clear explanation from Instagram.*

Q15. Have you ever experienced a sudden drop in reach or engagement?

- Yes
- No

Q16. (If yes) How often does this happen?

- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Very often

Q17. (If yes) How long do these drops usually last?

- 1–2 days
- 3–7 days
- More than a week
- Unpredictable

On a scale from 1 to 5: 1 = Strongly disagree | 5 = Strongly agree

Q18. I feel that my content sometimes becomes less visible without a clear reason.
Q19. I feel that Instagram may reduce the reach of my posts.
Q20. I notice sudden changes in engagement that I cannot explain.
Q21. I feel that some of my posts are shown to fewer people than usual.
Q22. I feel that I have experienced “shadow banning” (reduced visibility without explanation).
Q23. When you experience a drop in reach, what do you think caused it?

- Changes in the algorithm

- Content quality
- Posting time
- Sensitive or controversial topics
- I don't know
- Other: _____

SECTION 5 – PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT (ALGORITHMIC ANXIETY)

This section explores the emotional impact of content performance and visibility.

On a scale from 1 to 5: 1 = Strongly disagree | 5 = Strongly agree

Q24. Drops in engagement make me feel frustrated.
Q25. I feel anxious when my content performs poorly.
Q26. I sometimes doubt my abilities because of low engagement.
Q27. I feel stressed about maintaining visibility on Instagram.
Q28. My mood is influenced by how my content performs.

SECTION 6 – BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES

This section examines how creators adapt or respond to Instagram's algorithm.

On a scale from 1 to 5: 1 = Strongly disagree | 5 = Strongly agree

Q29. I change my content strategy based on performance metrics.
Q30. I follow trends mainly to increase visibility.
Q31. I delete posts that perform poorly.
Q32. I avoid certain topics to prevent negative effects.

Some creators use strategies to respond to changes in visibility. The options below include short explanations.

33. Which of the following strategies have you used to deal with Instagram's algorithm or visibility changes?
(You can select more than one option.)

- Engagement groups / pods: groups where creators interact with each other's posts (likes, comments, saves) to increase visibility
- Coded language / "algospeak": modifying words or captions to avoid content restrictions or reduced reach
- Backup account: having a second account in case the main one loses visibility or access

- Paid promotion / sponsored posts: paying Instagram to increase content visibility
- None of these

On a scale from 1 to 5: 1 = Strongly disagree | 5 = Strongly agree

Q34. I try to work around the algorithm when possible.

SECTION 7 – FINAL PERCEPTION

This section captures your overall perception of Instagram's role as a platform.

On a scale from 1 to 5: 1 = Strongly disagree | 5 = Strongly agree

Q35. Instagram behaves like a "manager" that controls my activity.
Q36. I feel dependent on Instagram for visibility and growth.
Q37. I feel I have full control over my success on Instagram.

OPTIONAL FINAL QUESTION

Q38. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with Instagram's visibility, algorithm, or shadow banning?