

# ROLE OF ALGORITHMIC VISIBILITY IN SHAPING USER COMMUNICATION ON INSTAGRAM

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## **Abstract:**

Digital platforms increasingly shape contemporary communication practices through algorithmic systems that organise visibility. Instagram, one of the most influential social media platforms, does not merely host user-generated content but actively governs communication by determining what content gains reach and engagement. While existing research has examined platform governance through moderation policies and institutional control, less attention has been paid to algorithmic visibility as a communicative process in itself. This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design to examine how Instagram communicates norms, expectations, and behavioural rules through visibility rather than explicit instructions. Drawing on academic literature, official Instagram platform documents, and qualitative observational analysis, the study finds that Instagram frames its algorithms as neutral and user-centric while implicitly shifting responsibility for visibility outcomes onto users. Consequently, users engage in self-regulation by adapting their communication practices to perceived algorithmic preferences. The paper argues that algorithmic visibility functions as a subtle yet powerful mechanism of platform governance that shapes digital discourse through feedback, uncertainty, and normative cues.

**Keywords:** Algorithmic visibility, Platform governance, Instagram, Digital communication, Algorithmic power.

## **1. Introduction**

Social media platforms have become central to everyday communication, identity construction, and cultural participation. Platforms such as Instagram shape how individuals express themselves, interact with others, and gain recognition in digital spaces. Unlike traditional media, social media platforms rely heavily on algorithmic systems to determine content visibility, ranking, and reach. These algorithms influence which voices are amplified and which remain marginal.

Instagram frequently presents its algorithms as neutral mechanisms designed to enhance user experience by showing “relevant” content. However, algorithmic visibility is not a passive or purely technical outcome. It actively structures communication by rewarding certain practices and discouraging others. Users rarely receive direct explanations for changes in visibility, yet they learn platform norms through engagement metrics such as likes, comments, shares, and reach.

This paper examines algorithmic visibility as a communicative process and a form of platform governance on Instagram. Rather than focusing solely on moderation or policy enforcement, the study highlights how visibility itself communicates expectations and shapes user behaviour. By analysing official Instagram documents and observable user practices, the paper demonstrates how governance operates subtly through discourse, feedback, and uncertainty.

## **2. Review of Literature**

**2.1 Algorithmic Power and Visibility:** Algorithms are widely understood as socio-technical systems embedded with institutional priorities rather than neutral tools (Kitchin, 2017). Bucher (2018) argues

that algorithms exercise power by shaping what users see and how they act, often without explicit awareness. Visibility, therefore, becomes a key site of power.

**2.2 Platform Governance:** Gillespie (2018) conceptualises platform governance as the combination of policies, moderation practices, and technical systems that regulate participation. Ranking algorithms play a crucial role by amplifying some content while suppressing others, effectively governing discourse without overt censorship.

**2.3 User Behaviour and Self-Regulation:** Users primarily experience algorithms through outcomes such as engagement and reach. Research shows that users adapt their communication strategies based on what gains visibility, engaging in self-regulation to align with perceived platform norms (van Dijck et al., 2018).

**2.4 Inequality and Algorithmic Bias:** Noble (2018) highlights that algorithmic systems often reproduce existing social inequalities by privileging certain voices, aesthetics, and topics. Algorithmic visibility thus reflects broader power relations within digital culture.

### 3. Need and Significance of the Study

As Instagram increasingly shapes public discourse, cultural production, and everyday modes of self-expression, it is essential to examine how governance on digital platforms operates beyond explicit policies and written rules. While platforms formally communicate standards through terms of use and community guidelines, much of their regulatory power is exercised indirectly through algorithmic systems that organise visibility. Analysing algorithmic visibility therefore allows for a deeper understanding of how platforms subtly guide user behaviour, influence communicative norms, and structure participation without direct commands or overt enforcement.

This study is significant because it foregrounds algorithmic visibility as a communicative and governing mechanism rather than a purely technical outcome. By focusing on how visibility functions as feedback and instruction, the research reveals the ways in which users learn platform norms through engagement metrics, reach, and perceived success or failure. Such an approach moves beyond traditional analyses of moderation and censorship to highlight more diffuse and less visible forms of power embedded in platform design.

The study makes important contributions to communication studies, media studies, and digital sociology by:

- **Conceptualising algorithmic visibility as a form of communication** through which platforms convey norms, values, and expectations to users
- **Highlighting subtle and indirect modes of platform governance** that operate through feedback, uncertainty, and self-regulation rather than explicit rules
- **Contributing to ongoing debates on transparency, accountability, and user agency**, particularly in relation to how responsibility for visibility outcomes is shifted from platforms to users

By examining these dynamics, the study enhances scholarly understanding of how power and discourse function within algorithmically mediated environments and underscores the need for greater critical engagement with platform governance in contemporary digital culture.

### 4. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine algorithmic visibility as a communicative process on Instagram
2. To analyse how Instagram's official documents frame algorithms and user responsibility
3. To explore how users adapt communication practices based on visibility cues
4. To understand algorithmic visibility as a mechanism of platform governance

### 5. Hypotheses of the Study

1. Algorithmic visibility on Instagram functions as an indirect form of communication that conveys platform norms.

2. Instagram’s official discourse frames algorithms as neutral while implicitly shifting responsibility for visibility outcomes onto users.
3. Users adapt their communication practices based on engagement metrics, leading to self-regulation.
4. Uncertainty surrounding visibility strengthens platform governance by encouraging behavioural conformity.

## 6. Research Methodology

### 6.1 Research Design

A qualitative and interpretive research design was adopted to examine discourse, framing, and meaning-making processes.

### 6.2 Scope of the Study

The study focuses exclusively on Instagram as a major visual and algorithm-driven platform.

### 6.3 Data Sources

Data Source	Description
Academic Literature	Studies on algorithms, visibility, and platform governance
Official Instagram Documents	Terms of Use, Community Guidelines, Ranking Explained, Tips for Improving Reach
Observational Analysis	Public user behaviour and engagement patterns

### 6.4 Method of Analysis

Discourse analysis was employed to examine how language, framing, and silence in platform documents communicate governance and responsibility.

## 7. Results and Discussion

### 7.1 Framing of Algorithmic Neutrality

Instagram consistently frames its algorithms as tools designed to improve user experience. However, official documents avoid providing detailed explanations of ranking mechanisms, reinforcing opacity.

### 7.2 Shifting Responsibility to Users

Documents such as *Tips for Improving Your Reach* emphasise content quality and engagement strategies, subtly suggesting that visibility depends on user effort rather than platform control.

### 7.3 Visibility as Feedback and Discipline

Engagement metrics function as feedback signals that reward conformity and discourage deviation. Users adjust tone, format, posting frequency, and themes to align with perceived algorithmic preferences.

### 7.4 Algorithmic Visibility as Governance

Visibility operates as a governing mechanism by:

- Encouraging self-regulation
- Creating uncertainty
- Reinforcing normative communication styles

## 8. Major Findings

Finding	Description
Visibility as Communication	Algorithms communicate norms through reach and engagement
Discursive Framing	Instagram presents algorithms as neutral and supportive
User Self-Regulation	Users modify behaviour to gain visibility
Governance through Uncertainty	Lack of transparency strengthens platform control

## 9. Implications of the Study

### Theoretical Implications

This study extends existing theories of platform governance by foregrounding algorithmic visibility as a form of discourse rather than merely a technical or operational outcome. By conceptualising visibility as a communicative mechanism, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how power, norms, and meaning are produced and circulated within algorithmically mediated environments. It challenges policy-centric and moderation-focused approaches to platform governance by demonstrating that regulation also occurs through indirect signals such as reach, engagement, and algorithmic feedback. This perspective enriches communication and media theory by emphasising the role of visibility in shaping digital discourse, user subjectivities, and self-regulatory practices.

### Practical Implications

From a practical standpoint, the findings highlight the need for greater algorithmic transparency and accountability on social media platforms such as Instagram. The study demonstrates how opacity surrounding visibility mechanisms shifts responsibility for success or failure onto users, often without clear guidance. By making these subtle governance processes visible, the research can inform platform users about the underlying dynamics that influence content reach and engagement, enabling more critical and informed participation.

Additionally, the study offers valuable insights for policymakers, regulators, and researchers by illustrating how governance operates beyond formal rules and moderation policies. Recognising algorithmic visibility as a governing mechanism can support the development of more nuanced regulatory frameworks that address indirect forms of control, promote user agency, and encourage fairer and more transparent digital environments.

## 10. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that algorithmic visibility on Instagram functions as a powerful communicative and governing mechanism that shapes user behaviour and digital discourse. Rather than relying solely on explicit rules or direct moderation, Instagram governs participation by organising what content is made visible, rewarded, or rendered marginal. Through engagement metrics and fluctuating reach, the platform implicitly teaches users how to communicate, what forms of expression are encouraged, and which practices are less likely to gain attention.

The findings reveal that visibility operates through feedback, uncertainty, and discourse, encouraging users to interpret algorithmic signals and engage in self-regulation. By framing algorithms as neutral and user-centric while maintaining opacity around visibility processes, Instagram shifts responsibility for success and failure onto users. This dynamic reinforces platform power while limiting meaningful user agency.

By conceptualising algorithmic visibility as a form of communication, this study offers critical insight into how power, norms, and governance operate within platform-mediated environments. It highlights the need to move beyond policy-focused analyses to examine the subtle, everyday mechanisms through which platforms shape participation and expression. Future research may extend this framework through comparative analyses across different social media platforms or by exploring how diverse user communities experience and negotiate algorithmic visibility in varying cultural and socio-political contexts.

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