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# “PS. If I go missing... i have been banned again”

— A netnographic study of users’ opposition to algorithmic censorship of  
the female body on Instagram

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Bachelor's thesis: SOCK10, 15 hp  
Spring term 2022  
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# Abstract

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As algorithmically-driven content moderation has become a common feature of social media platforms to suppress communications deemed undesirable, scholars have started to examine users’ relations to algorithmic systems and problems of machine bias and governmentality. While most researchers have focused on the negative aspects of censorship, few have explored the possibilities of users to oppose algorithmic control. Through a netnographic approach and content analysis of social media posts, the purpose of this thesis was to address the possibility of Instagram users to oppose algorithmic censorship of the female body. The analysis draws on Michel de Certeau’s (1984) concepts of *strategies* as the ways in which platforms censor their users, and *tactics* as users’ acts of technology resistance for trying to maintain visibility on the platform. The thesis found that users’ opposition largely revolved around expectation violation, with “folk theories” and “folk beliefs” acting as frames for formulating various forms of “tactics of opposition”. In doing so, this thesis raises questions about the opportunity for productive agency for users and our increasingly complex relationship with automated technologies in everyday life.

Keywords: Algorithm; Censorship; Technology; User Agency; Algorithmic Resistance

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Society is increasingly digital with much personal communication, public discourse and political debate being mediated by online platforms.<sup>1</sup> Companies owning these “social platforms” now play key roles in structuring communications. From their earliest days, many social platforms promoted the benefits of connecting people and the free exchange of information.<sup>2</sup> However, they have with time adopted forms of content moderation to be able to protect users from offensive or illegal content, in accordance with relevant laws and guidelines. In most cases, content moderation has primarily relied on users reporting content or moderators who, based on guidelines, review these reports and determine whether a violation has occurred.<sup>3</sup> But remaining is the fact that social platforms typically process huge amounts of information due to their massive userbases, and to manage user data platforms are increasingly using algorithmic systems to help identify prohibited content.<sup>4</sup> While there is significant doubt that algorithms can ever fully replace human moderators, automating content moderation allows far greater quantities of information to be assessed more quickly. It is the inauguration and prospect of these algorithmic forms of censorship with which this thesis is concerned.

Although platforms generally downrank certain kinds of material in order to reduce its dissemination, the goal of algorithms is often to recognise prohibited content at upload to automatically prevent it from being posted or remove it from the platform before it is shown to other users.<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Cobbe (2020) argues that we should be careful not to overstate the abilities of algorithms, as automated moderation systems will often struggle to deal with complex material, and lack the ability to consider context in determining whether content is problematic or not. As a result, moderation is difficult to automate, with some kinds of content proving to be

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Cobbe. “Algorithmic Censorship by Social Platforms: Power and Resistance,” *Philosophy & Technology*. 34:4 (2021), p.740.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.741.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

particularly problematic to identify.<sup>6</sup> The argument of this thesis is not concerned with the algorithms themselves, nor with the various technical or legal issues that content moderation may create. Instead it is concerned with examining the consequences of algorithmic censorship through the perspective of users.

The algorithms on social platforms operate automatically as a part of digital infrastructures and consequently become part of the digital experience. In many instances the internal functions of machine learning are necessarily complex and often hidden by platform companies, contributing to a myth that algorithms operate accurately and objectively.<sup>7</sup> Access to the configuration of algorithms is accordingly limited, and necessary skills to interpret the data are bound to specific expertise, not necessarily making transparency easily achieved.<sup>8</sup> This so-called “black box” characteristic of algorithms constitutes one prominent dilemma brought forth by scholars as it becomes increasingly harder for the common person to critique platform companies.<sup>9</sup>

Content moderation is in turn ruled by in-platform laws known as Community Guidelines formulated by the platform companies. Aside from guiding how their platforms should be presented to audiences, advertisers and governments, the users are asked to comply with the Community Guidelines. The Guidelines determine what communications and activities are acceptable in a public place which has resulted in platforms limiting nudity and sexual expression. This particular topic has sparked notable debate regarding the popular social media platform Instagram and its representation of the female body. Instagram’s moderation of female nudity has been condemned by artists, activists and celebrities after bans of pictures of female nipples which initiated the online hashtag protest #FreeTheNipple.<sup>10</sup> Even though, in the aftermath of the protest, Instagram included breastfeeding and mastectomy pictures in their Community Guidelines, content showing nudity on these platforms continues to be viewed as problematic.<sup>11</sup> Within recent multidisciplinary scholarship, biases and discriminations of algorithmic systems have been brought to light. One example being the book *Algorithms of*

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<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Cobbe 2021, p.741.

<sup>7</sup> Emily van der Nagel. “‘Networks that work too well’: intervening in algorithmic connections,” *Media International Australia* 168:1 (2018), p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> Kelley Cotter. “Shadowbanning is not a thing.: black box gaslighting and the power to independently know and credibly critique algorithms,” *Information, Communication & Society* (2021), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Emily van der Nagel 2018, p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> Carolina Are. “How Instagram’s algorithm is censoring women and vulnerable users but helping online abusers.” *FEMINIST MEDIA STUDIES* 20:5 (2020), p.1.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

*Oppression* (2018) by Safiya Umoja Noble, illustrating how Google Search results tend to reproduce discriminatory racial and gender stereotypes of African Americans.<sup>12</sup>

Learning machines are deeply embedded in cultures, relations, institutions and practices that constitute societies. As Massimo Airoidi (2022) argues, “the fact that /.../ learning machines participate in society while being simultaneously participated in by it, shakes to the foundations taken-for-granted dichotomies and sociological assumptions.”<sup>13</sup> Far from being “merely technical” and, therefore neutral, the socio-technical properties of algorithmic systems makes for a point of departure for this thesis. Further, Instagram’s controversial algorithmic censorship of the female body, and most importantly, how users may evade and oppose the platform's content moderation will be explored.

## 1.2 Purpose and research questions

Automated algorithms enable computers to learn from human generated data and real-time feedback to classify user data, manipulate choices, predict and police riskful user behaviour.<sup>14</sup> Even though algorithmic systems make for a more enjoyable digital experience, algorithms “do so essentially in order to make digital services more engaging, addictive and profitable”.<sup>15</sup> In other words, successful platform companies, such as Instagram, automate social activity, transforming social action into their main product.<sup>16</sup> The increase of algorithms autonomous participation in social contexts, where they can actively mould social behaviour, makes scholars argue that algorithms have become social agents that can actively reinforce and reproduce specific social orders.<sup>17</sup> In this case, a specific representation of female bodies on a social media platform.

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<sup>12</sup> Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression* (New York: New York University Press 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Massimo Airoidi, *Machine Habitus - Toward a Sociology of Algorithms* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), p. 146.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Philipp Bachmann and Gabriele Siegert, “How to Buy, Sell, and Trade Attention: A Sociology of (Digital) Attention Markets,” in *Handbook of Economic Sociology for the 21st Century - New Theoretical Approaches, Empirical Studies and Developments*, ed. Andrea Maurer (Cham: Springer: 2021), p. 153.

<sup>17</sup> See Massimo Airoidi, *Machine Habitus - Toward a Sociology of Algorithms* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).

Despite the rising control of automated techno-social systems, “one should not forget that humans are more than mere targets”.<sup>18</sup> They are reactive and reflexive and can identify attempts to censor or persuade them. As such, users may conform to automated commands or “deliberately ignore or actively resist them”.<sup>19</sup> The possibility for users of having agency within a platform mediated by algorithmic systems is an intriguing paradox and research subject.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, the purpose of this thesis is to further explore how Instagram users oppose algorithmic censorship of the female body on Instagram. At this stage, censorship will be generally defined as the action of preventing part or whole of a communication from being seen or made publicly available.<sup>21</sup> The thesis will be a user-centric study, following female users of Instagram, in order to examine the means through which they oppose algorithmic censorship through sociomaterial entanglements, theories and beliefs, and most importantly tactics. As such the thesis emanates from the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** How do Instagram users experience algorithmic censorship of the female body on Instagram?
- **RQ2:** What tactics do they employ to continue using the app for posting about the female body?
- **RQ3:** Why do the Instagram users believe that they are being censored?

### 1.3 Delimitations

The decision was made to limit findings to one platform for reasons of consistency and comparability. Instagram is taken as a particularly interesting case due to its widespread use, experienced long-time users and the increase in public attention toward its algorithms.<sup>22</sup> However, only examining one platform is complicated by the fact that most users continuously

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<sup>18</sup> Philipp Bachmann and Gabriele Siegert 2021, p. 154.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Massimo Airoidi 2022, p. 116.

<sup>21</sup> Cambridge Dictionary, *Censorship*, n.d, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/censorship> (retrieved 2022-05-17)

<sup>22</sup> Taina Bucher. “The algorithmic imaginary: exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms,” *Information, Communication & Society* 20:1 (2017), p. 33.

hop between different platforms.<sup>23</sup> It is important to highlight that the findings of this thesis can only be applied to Instagram and a selected group of Instagram users.

The thesis begins with outlining an overview of previous research in the field, introducing the key concepts “shadowbanning” and “algorithmic folk theories”. Then turning to Michel de Certeau and his theory of dual-concepts “strategies” and “tactics”, arguing that the Instagram users' resistance to algorithmic censorship can be viewed as “tactics of opposition”. Following this, I discuss and argue for selected methodological approaches as well as reflect on the ethical considerations of the data collection. After presenting the resulting material, the analysis begins with discussing the ways in which the Instagram users experience censorship and how they think the censoring algorithms works. This part of the analysis opens up an examination of the users' tactics of opposition and the subversive potential of tactics. Finally, I turn to why users believe that they are being censored, arguing that “algorithmic folk beliefs” are an integral part of opposition to algorithms. Thereafter, the analysis is reflected upon through a discussion of the potential and limitations of tactics to oppose strategies of control. Lastly, the thesis ends with a conclusion of its main arguments and reflections upon the work as a whole.

## 2. Previous research

This chapter provides a brief overview of existing scholarship on social media and users of algorithmic systems, bringing forward the key concepts of “shadowbanning” and “algorithmic folk theory”. These concepts, together with the presentation of theory in the upcoming section, provide the context and basis for the upcoming analysis.

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<sup>23</sup> John Postill and Sarah Pink. “Social media ethnography: the digital researcher in a messy web,” *Media International Australia* 145:1 (2012), p. 131.



## 2.1 The shadowbanning dispute

Through their Community Guidelines, Instagram establishes the institutional conditions for using their platform, and can be said to “guard” these participatory norms through their algorithms.<sup>24</sup> In order to strategically navigate the platform users are required to understand the algorithms to grow their following, attain visibility, and ultimately bring about success.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the phenomenon of “shadowbanning” has aggravated many users of the social media platform.

“Shadowbanning” is a user-generated term, formed to explain how, without notice or consent, a user’s posts and/or accounts stop appearing in the public spaces on Instagram: Explore-, Hashtag-, and Reels page.<sup>26</sup> The users’ content can still be seen by their followers, but becomes invisible, or like a shadow, for the rest of the Instagram-community. As such, the shadowban prevents the users’ accounts from reaching “non-followers” and for their accounts to grow.<sup>27</sup> This “invisibilization,” then, guarantees that content deemed inappropriate and harmful is prevented from being spread, while accounts still remain on the platform and may provide revenue and data for the platform.<sup>28</sup>

As Callie Middlebrook (2020) explains, a shadowban “is typically only noticed after its effects have been felt, by observing a drop in comments, likes, and views.”<sup>29</sup> Users often realise that they have been shadowbanned by attending to visibility metrics, noticing stark drops in their level of engagement.<sup>30</sup> In addition to being frustrating for the average user, a shadowban also becomes a source of anxiety for those users who also have built a business or a reputation around their account.<sup>31</sup> With no guidelines available for users to know how and why they have been shadowbanned, it becomes nearly impossible to dispute this supposed “secret” censorship.<sup>32</sup>

Shadowbanning is believed by users to target what is labelled as “borderline content”, therefore, greatly impacting content portraying female-presented bodies, nudity and sexuality.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Kelley Cotter 2021, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Danielle Blunt, Emily Coombes, Shanelle Mullin, and Ariel Wolf, “Posting into the void: studying the impact of shadowbanning on sex workers and activists.” (2020), p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Callie Middlebrook. “The Grey Area: Instagram, Shadowbanning, and the Erasure of Marginalized Communities” (2020), p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Kelley Cotter 2021, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Carolina Are, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

The users' critique "includes accusations that Instagram disproportionately shadowbans people of colour, women and members of the LGBTQ+ community, among other."<sup>34</sup> Members of marginalised communities testify that often non-sexual pictures of queer people, women of colour and plus-sized women are repeatedly shadowbanned, creating a narrative that their bodies are by nature sexual and therefore have to be hidden.<sup>35</sup>

Instagram has, in its defence, denied the platform's usage of shadowbanning. Instead, the company depicts the users' experience with shadowbanning as a myth.<sup>36</sup> This has provoked more confusion as the platform does not acknowledge the users' actual experiences.<sup>37</sup> Kelley Cotter (2021) observed that, in spite of Instagram's denials, there is "an ongoing dispute between influencers and Instagram whether shadowbanning is real."<sup>38</sup> Through interviews with users and online materials (e.g., blog posts, social media posts, videos, etc.) Cotter examined how it is possible for two completely distant claims about algorithmic moderation to persist.<sup>39</sup> Instagram has, more specifically, attempted to debunk shadowbanning as a myth by suggesting three alternative explanations: glitches in their systems, blaming users for their own failure to create engaging content, or suggesting that what seems like shadowbanning is beyond the company's control.<sup>40</sup> This, according to Cotter, is an effort to shy away from addressing the algorithmic moderation and instead problematically establish that visibility on the app depends mostly on "serendipity".<sup>41</sup>

This information asymmetry between the platform and its users is emergent from algorithms' black box nature and facilitates the possibility to undermine users' attempt to "effectively advocate for their needs and interests".<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, what is of interest in the shadowbanning dispute is not necessarily what is technically accurate about the algorithms, but rather how this dispute shows the fragile state of users' capabilities to generate critical and credible claims about algorithmic censorship.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Kelley Cotter 2021, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Chanté Joseph. "Instagram's Murky 'Shadow Bans' Just Serve to Censor Marginalised Communities," *The Guardian* November 8, 2019, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/nov/08/instagram-shadow-bans-marginalise-D-communities-queer-plus-sized-bodies-sexually-suggestive](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/nov/08/instagram-shadow-bans-marginalise-D-communities-queer-plus-sized-bodies-sexually-suggestive) (retrieved 2022-05-17).

<sup>36</sup> Kelley Cotter 2021, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

## 2.2 Algorithmic folk theories

Although the depiction of the shadowbanning dispute may have painted a bleak picture, scholars still propose that resistance to algorithmic biases, such as those inherent in shadowbanning, may still be possible through various creative actions and levels of coordination. In this regard, Jennifer Cobbe (2020) set forth a useful distinction between “everyday resistance” and “organised resistance”.<sup>44</sup> The latter refers to a collective response to undermine governmentality by adopting alternative platforms and communication services.<sup>45</sup> Everyday resistance, in turn, refers to individual or small-scale actions seeking to evade or undermine censorship through the everyday use of the platform.<sup>46</sup> Common methods for everyday resistance include altering images, making use of irony, humour, changing one’s language, creating new phrases or hashtags in order to avoid being detected by algorithms.<sup>47</sup> These listings of diverse methods of resistance are important to highlight as users may combine or promote several in effort to gain visibility on social media platforms.

Another way to view resistance, and gain a perhaps more nuanced understanding of user’s behaviour, is to make use of the concept “algorithmic folk theories”, meaning non-authoritative theories users employ to explain how a technological system operates.<sup>48</sup> In practice, it means to not only consider how users oppose algorithmic censorship, but also *how* these acts of resistance are informed by the users’ views and experiences of algorithms. Here the shadowbanning dispute can be seen as depicting the frustrations of the users, as well as theories about the inner workings of this alleged content moderation. Besides, a growing body of literature focuses on “folk theories” to understand how users’ conceptions about algorithms inform how they might interact strategically with algorithmic systems.

One exemplary study is that of Karizat et al. (2021), utilising folk theories as a framework for their study of how TikTok users understand the interplay between identity and

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<sup>44</sup> Jennifer Cobbe 2021, p. 758.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 759.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 758.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 759.

<sup>48</sup> Nadia Karizat, Daniel Delmonaco, Motahhare Eslami and Nazanin Andalibi. “Algorithmic Folk Theories and Identity: How TikTok Users Co-Produce Knowledge of Identity and Engage in Algorithmic Resistance,” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 5:CSCW2, Article 305. (2021), p. 2.

algorithmic processes on the popular social platform.<sup>49</sup> Through interviews with users they found that the TikTok-algorithms were perceived to tailor content according to users' personal identities, and therein actively suppress content based on certain ethnicities, bodily and physical characteristics, sexualities, and political orientations.<sup>50</sup> The informants adapted their digital behaviour according to this understanding or theory. Firstly, users intentionally engage in selected content hoping to "train" the algorithmic recommendations to align their online identity, that is how the algorithm understands them, with how they view themselves.<sup>51</sup> Secondly, the user's also intentionally engage with content from creators with specific social identities perceived as having a disadvantage on the platform, hoping to direct algorithmic visibility.

Reactions and resistance to algorithms reveal that users have certain expectations of social platforms. DeVito et al., (2017), in turn, argues that users' expectations are to be considered when talking about folk theories, as reactions are likely driven by the degree to which an algorithmic system violates users' expectations.<sup>52</sup> Resistance to algorithms, then, "largely revolves around expectation violation, with folk theories acting as frames for those reactions."<sup>53</sup> Also, that "user reactions themselves are a potentially valuable source of data in that they can reveal both latent folk theories and expectations."<sup>54</sup> As such, examining folk theories can give us insight into how users' understandings of algorithmic systems might inform and affect their tactics of opposition.

In summary, algorithms may be diffuse in their effect because of the opacity, or black box nature, of algorithmic processes. This contributes to the need for users to construct algorithmic folk theories, as well as a need for creative and innovative methods of resistance. It is useful then, for the upcoming analysis, to recognise that investigating acts of algorithmic resistance will include user beliefs about and expectations of algorithms and how they, in turn, influence opposition within social media platforms. In what follows, I suggest that a better understanding of users' tactics and their experiences can be supported by de Certeau and illustrated by the case of algorithmic censorship of the female body on Instagram.

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<sup>49</sup> Nadia Karizat, Daniel Delmonaco, Motahhare Eslami and Nazanin Andalibi 2021, p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Michael A. DeVito, Darren Gergle and Jeremy Birmholtz. "Algorithms ruin everything': #RIPTwitter, Folk Theories, and Resistance to Algorithmic Change in Social Media," *In Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '17)*. Association for Computing Machinery (2017), p. 3163.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

### 3. Theory

In order to make users' reactions, relationships and subsequent opposition to algorithmic censorship researchable, and above all analysable in an academic context, I will make use of de Certeau's theorisation of the concepts "strategies" and "tactics". Building on this theoretical framework, as well as on previous research utilising these concepts, the aim of this chapter is to argue for how users' opposition to algorithmic censorship can be understood as *tactics*.

#### 3.1 De Certeau's strategies and tactics

In *The Practices of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel de Certeau investigates the productive and consumptive ways in which the ordinary person individuates culture through appropriating or altering the traditions, languages, and objects that make up everyday life. In contrast to his contemporaries Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, who were interested in power structures and their reproduction, de Certeau was interested in how the common person operates within and in spite of such structural powers.<sup>55</sup> According to de Certeau, social science, as it was then, lacked the tools to understand such activity. *The Practices of Everyday Life*, is then, as de Certeau states, "part of a continuing investigation of the ways in which users – commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules – operate."<sup>56</sup> Important to note here is that the writing of his book was simply an aim to make this type of discussion possible, and not to carry all its conceptualisations to their conclusions.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Kate Mannell. "Technology Resistance and de Certeau: Deceptive texting as a Tactic of Everyday Life," *Journal of Media and Communication* 8.1 (2017), p. 43.

<sup>56</sup> de Certeau, M. *The Practice of Everyday Life* (S. Rendall, trans.). (Berkeley: University of California Press 1984), p. xi.

<sup>57</sup> Ian Buchanan. "Strategy and Tactics," in Michel de Certeau: Cultural Theorist, by Ian Buchanan (SAGE Publications Ltd 2000), p.4.

Moreover, as part of de Certeau's inquest of the everyday, he presents the concepts of "strategy" and "tactics", being two of his most well known concepts.<sup>58</sup> According to de Certeau, *strategies* are the "hidden means" of dominant institutions and their objectives, while *tactics* are individuals' actions in everyday activities and how ordinary people appropriate products created by these dominant institutions.<sup>59</sup> A way to understand this is through the distinction between *place* and *space*.<sup>60</sup> Strategies aim to design a limiting place, creating a kind of protected environment that can be easily managed and controlled.<sup>61</sup> To counteract, tactics are the defiant practices of those lacking power, those who are "caught in the nets of 'discipline'."<sup>62</sup> In other words, tactics work through and within the same system they resist rather than being a form of external hostility.<sup>63</sup> Trying to take up space in a certain predefined place, tactics are as Ian Buchanan (2000) points out "not in themselves subversive ... but they offer daily proof of the partiality of strategic control".<sup>64</sup> Corresponding to this understanding, several studies examining algorithmically related practices adopt Michel De Certeau's theory of strategies and *tactics* to approach users' behaviour on social platforms.<sup>65</sup>

Michele Willson (2017) draws on de Certeau's concepts to examine the roles of algorithms in the everyday, and suggests that social platforms employ strategies to engage in manipulation and power management. Internet connectivity and online systems are increasingly necessary for the enactment of activities and functions that could be classified as everyday activities, such as shopping or conversating.<sup>66</sup> Based on this understanding Wilson argues that systems enabled by code, software and algorithms work to constitute and enact everyday life. This fits nicely into de Certeau's discussion of strategies, as social platforms can be understood as managing everyday places via the use of complex strategies, such as the enactment of algorithms.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, we have to recognise that not all users are passive and will try to subvert the control of social platforms via, what I call, "tactics of opposition".<sup>68</sup> De Certeau

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<sup>58</sup> Ian Buchanan, p. 2.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Michel de Certeau 1984, p. xiv.

<sup>63</sup> Kate Mannell 2017, p. 45.

<sup>64</sup> Ian Buchanan 2000, p. 4.

<sup>65</sup> Emily van der Nagel, p.82.

<sup>66</sup> Michelle Willson. "Algorithms (and the) everyday," *Information, Communication & Society* 20:1 (2017), p. 139.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

emphasises that tactics can only temporarily evade power structures, rather than dismantling them.<sup>69</sup> Kate Mannell (2017) therefore argues that acts of tactics, paradoxically, enable people to stay within broader systems of (technological) control.<sup>70</sup> The ultimate form of resistance would perhaps be to remove oneself from the place of control, meaning in this case delete those apps not fulfilling needs or repeatedly censoring bodily expressions. Yet, how easy is it to actually escape technological control in contemporary everyday life?

The conceptualities of strategies and tactics may work as a basis for understanding opposition to technology to include everyday acts and practices of users. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's notion of strategies as the manipulations in which social platforms engage and control their users, and tactics as acts of defiance, this thesis investigates user tactics for opposing algorithms censorship. Much of de Certeau's understanding of strategies and tactics is already aligned with scholarship on algorithmic resistance.<sup>71</sup> However, this thesis argues that the connection between de Certeau and user resistance literature can be further developed, and that doing so encourages looking at users' practices like the ones examined in this thesis.

## 4. Methods

This chapter contains a discussion about the choice of methods. The merits and limitations of the chosen methods, with regard to the research purpose and material, are considered. I also discuss how the data has been collected and how it will be analysed. It has also been important to highlight the ethical considerations that are present in digital studies when discussing methods.

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<sup>69</sup> Emily van der Nagel, p. 89.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Kate Mannell 2017, p. 41.

## 4.1 Data collection: netnography

To examine user's experience with algorithmic censorship and their tactics of opposition, this thesis utilises netnography as a method for data collection. Netnography is a qualitative research approach used to study people's behaviours and attitudes online through analysing interactions and communications, and how these affect and are affected by daily life outside of the digital realm. As a method, netnography is approached as a continuation of ethnography and its concern with everyday life from a person's or a community member's point of view, while taking into account an online setting and adapting traditional research practices.<sup>72</sup> The aim is to "produce detailed and situated accounts on the very lived reality of people," seeking knowledge that others already possess."<sup>73</sup> It is this understanding and goal that guided the data collection.

In practice a researcher may, on one hand, passively observe digital behaviour and online discussions, or, on the other hand, actively engage in the environment and involve research participants.<sup>74</sup> The choice was made to adopt a passive netnography (referred to as "netnography" for the remainder of this chapter). By deciding on this approach the data collection affirms an unobtrusive nature, an inconspicuous process of observing and listening to users actions and reactions. Advantageously the users' activities observed are not disturbed by the presence of a researcher. However, there would not be the opportunity to ask the users if something during the fieldwork was unclear, or for further explanations of their pursuits. This could have been done through complementing the observation with interviews.

I already personally use the Instagram app daily, and approaching the social media platform as a researcher therefore meant recognising the platform as a research field. First, considering how content is produced and distributed on the app, and how this contributes to a specific nature of the data available to collect. A user has an account where they can upload (or "post") photos, videos and related texts. The users' accounts are also interactive in the sense that they have followers who leave comments and engage in discussions, and are intertextual, in that they link to other accounts, through "tagging" other users and #hashtagging.<sup>75</sup> The field therefore contains several types of data beyond the written text, such as images, videos, symbols (i.e.,

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<sup>72</sup> Meghan Lynch and Kerry Chamberlain. "Exploring the food blogosphere," in *Research Methods in Digital Food Studies*, ed. Jonathan Leer and Stinne Gunder Strøm Krogager. (London: Routledge 2021) p. 115.

<sup>73</sup> Piia Varis 2016, p. 56.

<sup>74</sup> Meghan Lynch and Kerry Chamberlain 2021, p. 116.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.



emojis) and hyperlinks.<sup>76</sup> In this case I had to deal with *products* rather than *processes*, and modifiable and editable as digital artefacts are, what remains visible for a researcher is the end result of possibly countless edits, changes and deletions.<sup>77</sup> Time stamps were a great resource in this respect, providing facts as to how interactions have unfolded temporally. What I could *not* observe during the fieldwork was conversations going on in the private messaging function of the app and users engaging privately with other users' content.

The data collection was initiated by using the search engine on the platform, searching for keywords to find relevant accounts and hashtags. From there, similar to a snowball selection, I also found users through them tagging each other and commenting on each other's posts. I quickly discovered a large amount of user content, and the need to compose criterias for selecting the most suitable posts and comments. The accounts and material had to be publicly accessible and the users needed to identify themselves as female or non-binary. Any text had to be in English, as important nuances can be lost in translation. The posts, captions and/or comments needed to address the issue of bodily visibility on the app or contain explicit statements opposing the Instagram algorithms and/or censorship of the female body. These criterias framed the data collection and helped identify a body of data that was chosen for analysis.

Two weeks was selected as a suitable time period for field work for two critical reasons: manageability and the exceedingly high number of entries.<sup>78</sup> I did not have a specific sample size but relied upon data saturation, which involved adding new material to the data set until no new insights were being revealed in the decided time frame.<sup>79</sup> The field work consisted of three overlapping sub-practices: immersion, exploring and archiving. Firstly, immersion through a consequent presence and use of the app on a daily basis for two weeks. Secondly, exploring relations and discovering content through following common hashtags, active users, and accounts frequently being tagged on pictures and videos. These explorations could end in a quick glance at a profile or in longer and more thorough explorations of posts and their comment section. Lastly, observations were recorded through screenshotting images and videos, noting the timestamps and captions, and copying comments, profile descriptions, hashtags and users being

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<sup>76</sup> Nida Ahmad and Holly Thorpe. "Muslim Sportswomen as Digital Space Invaders: Hashtag Politics and Everyday Visibilities," *Sport Communication and Social Justice* 8:4-5 (2020), p. 673.

<sup>77</sup> Piia Varis 2016, p. 62.

<sup>78</sup> Meghan Lynch and Kerry Chamberlain 2021, p. 117.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

tagged. This information was archived and categorised in a Google sheet, allowing for symbols, pictures and text to be gathered in one place.

## 4.2 Ethical considerations

During the fieldwork, I encountered several ethical challenges that required me to take a stand on the status of online sociality and online users. First, acknowledging and discussing the blurred boundaries between private and public life online. While all of the online activity collected during the fieldwork was publicly posted on public accounts, selection was a delicate matter as many of the users talked about sensitive topics such as illnesses or eating disorders. In addition, conducting passive observation is disputed among scholars when the online environment makes it possible to “lurk” unbeknownst to the users being observed.<sup>80</sup> Arguments regarding the invisibility issue range from opinions of lurking as not ethnographic observation in the traditional sense, to idealising the opportunity for collecting “natural” data.<sup>81</sup> Observing or following a hashtag or space specific to a small or potentially vulnerable community and without informing about research intentions is generally considered ethically questionable.<sup>82</sup> In managing this, I turned to Macham and Buchanan (2015) who propose that netnographers should carefully consider participant's expectations, reflecting on the sensitivity and potential vulnerability of both people and information, always with a primary focus on doing no harm.<sup>83</sup> In the absence of an official consensus, case-by-case consideration had to be made during the fieldwork as to the possible sensitivity of the content collected. As will be evident in the result, all of the users of this study presented themselves as public figures with a significant following, wanting to spread their content and raise awareness beyond the platform.

The second ethical consideration relates to the quoting of material and anonymity of the users. The fact that online materials can be easily traced and located has implications for how netnographers present their analyses and refer to their informants.<sup>84</sup> Anonymising data in order to

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<sup>80</sup> Piia Varis 2016, p. 62.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Kristina Göransson, *Etnografi - Sjösätt, navigera och ro i land ditt projekt* (Lund: Studentlitteratur 2019), p. 85.

<sup>83</sup> Meghan Lynch and Kerry Chamberlain 2021, p. 120.

<sup>84</sup> Piia Varis 2016, p. 59.

protect people's privacy is of course one familiar step in research, and this also goes for usernames and facts that can be traced to a person's (online) identity.<sup>85</sup> However, quotations from social media can still be typed into search engines and lead directly to original posts, revealing a user's identity.<sup>86</sup> For the presentation of the material, as an additional caution, comments deemed similar are combined to create non-traceable data while still maintaining the same information. Also, photos and artworks are re-illustrated by me. Here the safety and anonymity of the accounts are priorities at the expense of showing the original data in its pure form and context.

### 4.3 Analytical process

In qualitative research the analysis process is necessarily not rigid, with there always being an element of flexibility in how the researcher adapts analytical tools to a research environment.<sup>87</sup> This occasionally glorified flexibility was rather advantageous when examining novel socio-technical phenomena and made it possible to adapt already existing analytical methods. For analysing my data I made use of Ashley Rubin's (2021) approach to "content analysis," defined as "open" and "focused coding" of data and the use of "analytic memos" (notes with varying degrees of analysis).<sup>88</sup>

Content analysis can have varying definitions depending on the person you ask. It can be looking at the frequency of words or phrases in texts, making for statistical techniques for quantitative analysis of communicative content.<sup>89</sup> For Rubin, instead, it means coding: assigning a label, tag, or "code" to a piece of text.<sup>90</sup> Coding involved taking notes while relating images, comments and captions to larger themes or ideas. Every piece of data could have multiple codes (or themes).<sup>91</sup> Some codes were purely descriptive and had nothing to do with the thesis' theory,

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<sup>85</sup> Piia Varis 2016, p. 59.

<sup>86</sup> Meghan Lynch and Kerry Chamberlain 2021, p. 121.

<sup>87</sup> Ashley T. Rubin, *Rocking Qualitative Social Science. An Irreverent Guide to Rigorous Research* (Stanford University Press 2021), p. 180.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>89</sup> James Drisko and Tina Maschi, *Content Analysis* (New York: Oxford University, 2015), p. 1.

<sup>90</sup> Ashley T. Rubin 2021, p. 184.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

while others were informed by previous research and theory.<sup>92</sup> The goal was to end up with a list of quotations from the data spreadsheet organised by a particular topic, theme, concept.<sup>93</sup>

The coding process can be summarised as follows. First, “open coding” of a sample of one post from each user account (39 posts). This entailed being “open” and coding everything possibly relevant and I ended up with quite a large list of codes. This coding list was then pared down by going through it and reasoning about what is really interesting and relevant to the research purpose. This rinse was an ongoing process and practice throughout the analysis. Secondly, I did a closed coding of the full sample of data (147 posts). This is where I systematically used the pared down coding list to code the data, “closing” off other possible connections, and trying to be as consistent as possible. While performing the content analysis, I also wrote analytic memos.<sup>94</sup> These were mainly reactions to the data, who then served a purpose in kick-starting the analysis. As I became more familiar with the data, the analytical memos became more detailed and specific. This was quite a circular process of becoming familiar with my data, re-reading and re-coding, identifying theories and ideas among the users and the tactics presented in the data. The final codes were then categorised in regards to the three research questions, and will be presented as such thematically in the analysis.

## 5. Results

A total of 39 accounts, 147 posts and 370 comments were collected during the fieldwork and constitutes the empirical framework for the forthcoming analysis (see table 1.). Regarding followers, the mean value was 79 942 followers and the median was 7 445 followers. The majority of the users may then be considered to belong to the group called “micro influencers.” These are “non-celebrity” users on social media platforms, often referred to as bloggers, with expertise in a particular area who enjoy a considerable amount of followers and success

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<sup>92</sup> Ashley T. Rubin 2021, p. 187.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

thereof.<sup>95</sup> The account’s profiles were examined to depict the users’ intention with engaging on the platform. This was determined by how the users defined themselves and what they themselves perceived as their “purpose” on the app. Here was a good mix, and often diffuse distinctions, between users emphasising their professionalism and personal contribution, as both public and private persons. It was occasionally hard to depict a strict dividing line between the two as many users talk about deeply personal experiences on a public account, to a fairly large proportion of followers. The accounts talked about, among other things, Addiction, Body image, Chronic pain and illness, Eating Disorders, Shame, Self image, Trauma, Scars, Prosthetics, Mental health, and Female pleasure. A couple of accounts were solely dedicated to “freeing the nipple”, and focused only on that part of the female body, while others had a more broad repertoire of conversations and content related to their bodily experiences.

Table 1.

Accounts	Posts	Individual slides	Comments
39	147	203	370

Besides, the users’ also identified themselves as Psychotherapist, Socialworker, Artist, Illustrator, Digital creator, Educator, Advocate, Activists, Bloggers, Breast cancer survivor, Body Positive Artist, and Comic artist. Many had their own websites with the possibility to read about their personal stories, sign up for newsletters, follow links to their other social media accounts, and even financially support them via products they sell, by Paypal or their Etsy shop. Once again the personal and professional blend, which is what has given birth to influencers, is clearly present. What the accounts all have in common is talking about representation of, and education regarding, the female body, with all users finding it important to show stigmatised body parts, talk about health issues and experience comfort in a shared experience of these. The aim of their accounts is to help their followers to accept and understand their body or certain parts of it, such as breasts, or certain experiences with sickness and illnesses, trying to “inspire and empower”. They, therefore, feel a need, and also the right to post pictures or art pieces depicting the female

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<sup>95</sup> Tian Gan, Shaokun Wang, Meng Liu, Xuemeng Song, Yiyang Yao, and Liqiang Nie.”Seeking Micro-influencers for Brand Promotion,” In Proceedings of the 27th ACM International Conference on Multimedia (MM '19). Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, p. 1933.

body in its “natural” form. Unavoidably this triggers the algorithm and pushes the boundaries of the Community Guidelines on Instagram, resulting in repeated reports of violation of these same guidelines.

## 6. Analysis

The analysis consists of a thematic presentation of the results, where previous research, theory and empirical evidence is used to examine user behaviour. Starting with how the users experience algorithmic censorship and then what tactics they use to undermine the algorithm. Lastly, why the users believe they are being censored, circling back to their algorithmic folk theories and, as I will call it, *folk beliefs*.

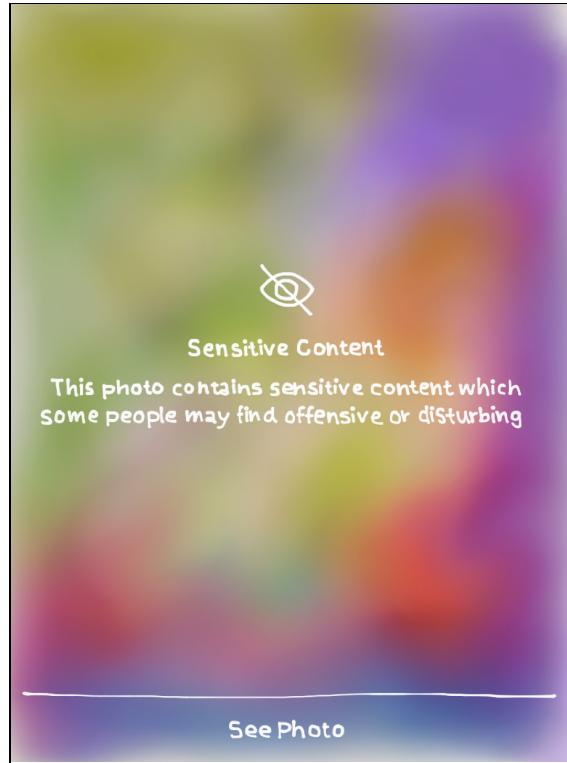
### 6.1 Users’ experience with algorithmic censorship

It did not take a lot of observing before encountering numerous posts and comments of users testifying how their content is repeatedly being censored on the platform, warning others of the inner workings of its algorithm, pointing out how it supposedly operates in a biased and unfair manner. For the most part this relates to content being censored or “hidden” after being deemed “inappropriate” or “sexual” in reference to the Community Guidelines. Rather quickly, as users discover that they are being censored, standard ways to use the platform begin to be restricted. For instance, users’ posts are not showing up under public pages, or are instantly removed upon posting, and posts can not be shared by followers or other users as expressed by users below:

@\_user\_ my post got removed right away. It's fucking bullshit!  
@user123 i'm unable to repost without it being taken down #wtf  
@\_user\_ i also tried to add it to my story 5 times but IG removed it...  
@useruser tried to repost and it got taken down and my account  
logged itself out SO UNNECESSARY!  
@ussser 5days blocked... here we go again... #instacensorship

What causes users to react is that they themselves do not view their content as inappropriate or “rule-breaking”, and they are therefore surprised as to why they are being censored and restricted on the platform. Or, in accordance to how DeVito et al. explains it, their expectations of the platform are violated, resulting in reactions and the formulation of both latent and manifest folk theories. Not considered in previous studies is that these expectations are also formulated by users taking into account their purposes of being on the platform. Their accounts are seen as altruistic, and the content produced is meant to empower and represent others, giving fuel to further reactions and feelings of anger when being censored. The censorship is then also seen to depend on both the identity of the users and the “cause” being promoted by them. As will be evident throughout the analysis, the algorithmic censorship is viewed as solely something negative by the users.

Hereafter, scrolling through users’ content I also encountered blurred-out posts marked as “Sensitive Content”. This usually means that the particular post in question has been reported either by a user or algorithm, but the content does not violate the Community Guidelines. Rather, posts, accounts, comments can be reported if they are *believed to* go against the Community Guidelines. What is seen as sensitive is then highly subjective, in the case of a user reporting another user. Instead of removing posts like these, Instagram marks them as “Sensitive” which warns followers and users of a posts sensitive nature before the one can choose to view its content:



In 2021 Instagram introduced what they call “Sensitive Content Control,” which allows the user to decide how much sensitive content shows up in the apps’ public pages.<sup>96</sup> Instagram themselves explains “sensitive content as posts that don’t necessarily break our rules, but could potentially be upsetting to some people – such as posts that may be sexually suggestive or violent”.<sup>97</sup> During my fieldwork, one particular “sensitive” post that depicted a pair of legs and had a caption telling of the users experience with body image issues seemed to upset followers:

**@user111** i wonder why this has been censored by @instagram?  
**@useruser** insta needs a reality check WHY has a vital and important post like this been censored? It is inspiring and offers incredible insight  
**@userrrr** This is an inspiring post get it together Zucc  
**@useruse** Who’s been reporting this? Just her legs ahhhhhh  
**@user\_\_** wtf instagram haha these are just legs

<sup>96</sup> Instagram, *Introducing Sensitive Content Control*, July 20, 2021, <https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/introducing-sensitive-content-control?msclkid=a96eea4ad03111ecbc080cac832196f9> (retrieved 2022-05-17).

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.



Content being marked as “Sensitive” is also one way in which users are experiencing censorship on Instagram. However, this type of censorship is not purely algorithmically enforced, proving that automating content moderation has been brought to relieve or help human moderators, in this case users reporting other users' content. One can also hypothesise that the ability of users to report on the content of others also helps to supplement the difficulties of algorithms in distinguishing context and human characteristics such as the use of humour or irony. Of course also helpful from a company's perspective trying to satisfy its users, highlighting that censorship can serve several purposes.

Continuing, as expected, users' experience with and negative reactions to being censored creates the need for explanations as to how technological systems operate, in this case, bringing forth algorithmic folk theories. In this case, users' almost exclusively identified the type of censorship they are experiencing as “shadowbanning”, here forming a grouping name for the strategies of control employed by Instagram via its algorithms. The users' own explanation of shadowbanning is consistent with thus far definition of the user-generated term:

**@userr** after posting an illustration of a woman in her underwear i got a weeknd ban AND my post was shadowbanned (IG restricting content by restricting visibility) SO frustrating! WHY are womens bodies a site of this tight regulation?!! PS. if I go missing again... i have been banned again.

**@useruser** IG has taken their censorship to the next level of banning, rejecting, removing posts and advertisements. It is apparent that our community are able to use social media, to not only raise awareness of the services available, but also support each other without the fear of facing restrictions and limitations on their pages and posts.

**@user\_\_\_** i read that “shadowbanning” isnt an official instagram term. well we do know that instagram has the power to deprioritize accounts on this app... posts can be hidden or restricted often unbeknownst to the user... this makes content undiscoverable on hashtags and the explore page.

This shows on one hand, that shadowbanning is a term that has been established as a legitimate and accurate theory for users trying to understand censorship on Instagram, and on the other proof of the information asymmetry between users and platforms criticised by Cotter. Shadowbanning does not contain technical explanations of the algorithm's inner workings, only how the results of algorithmic work affect users. However, this is not so odd as it is only the consequences of algorithmic processes that users can witness. So when talking about algorithmic

folk theories, it is important to highlight that they are not technically accurate in regards to how the algorithms work, and later why algorithms work as they do. Still, repeated experiences of censorship from users posting similar content is bound to bring about confusion and irritation.

The unpredictability of shadowbanning left many users feeling frustrated and discouraged, not least as the users, as stated, are influencers who depend on their following and the spread of their content for their business. One user stated that they feel like they are in a constant state of “I’m about to lose my account,” and with that lose all the hard work put in to gain their follower base. This highlights the precarity of platform labour, not having a say in the forming of Community Guidelines or censoring of content.<sup>98</sup> Again, censorship here being viewed as something biased and inaccurate by the users. Many users call the threat of being censored a “scare tactic” trying to keep them in check and it undoubtedly affecting their career:

@useerr i lost my account overnight and that has a big impact on my career! Am exhausted honestly  
@userr\_ we have no democratic way to oppose a ban/deletion/block... it feels like being bypassed by a stupid algorithm & no right to talk to a human!!!  
@\_\_user artists who rely on social media to promote their work only to have it taken away from them. Only choice is to start again from scratch. Some are now on their 7th or 8th account.  
@useruser my account was deleted four times in 2021 and i am in constant threat of deletion. our community deserves to be heard NOT silenced.

The users feel like their “guideline-abiding voices are being silenced” and hindered from gathering collectively. By restricting users’ the effects of being censored results in deep feelings of powerlessness and shame. Subsequently, one might wonder, who, or what, is to blame for this perceived unjust censorship? There seem to be both blame put on Instagram and its algorithms by the users:

@user1 insta has so much to answer for with their messed up shadowbanning  
@userrr instagram seriously need to get a grip on their policies and algorithms  
@useer IG needs to do better  
@user\_ @zuck @instagram  
@\_user\_ lets break this dumb ass algorithm!!!!

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<sup>98</sup> Kelley Cotter 2021, p. 2.

There are some users singling out Mark Zuckerberg<sup>99</sup> as responsible, and others “Instagram” or the algorithms themselves. But treating Instagram as an entity, and not having knowledge of the technical properties of its algorithms, make the reactions of the users feel like targetless shouts. Once again, the black box nature of algorithms, and the company denying the users experiences surrounding shadowbanning, creates a fragile state for users' capacity to generate credible criticism of the algorithmic censorship. However, the users are not willingly backing down, and refuse to stop posting about issues related to the female body, giving life to various tactics of opposition.

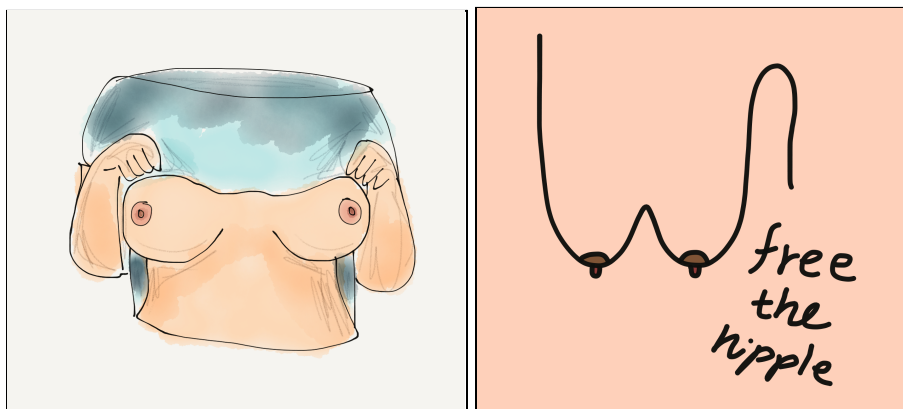
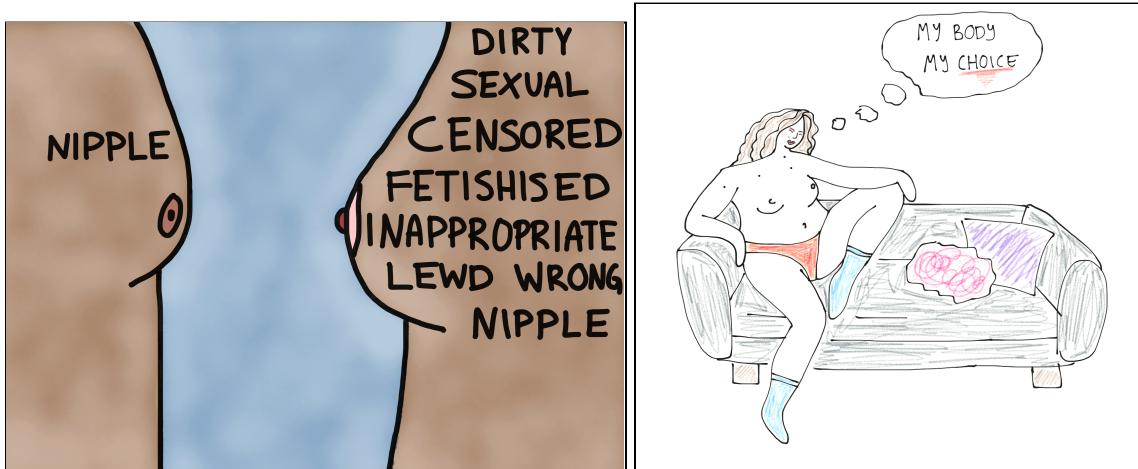
## 6.2 Tactics of opposition

Even though users keep experiencing censorship, they are determined to not stop posting pictures, illustrations or conversations about the female-presented body. Instead they try to find ways of making the female body visible and “post-able” on the app to oppose, bypass or evade the algorithmic censorship. These actions are conceptualised as “tactics of opposition”. Before explaining these, there is the need to underline what can be perceived as a sort of contradiction or paradox. While the users believe they are “guideline-abiding”, they simultaneously understand that the content they produce keeps being banned and censored, creating a need for tactics to be developed. And of course, through the eyes of perhaps a user reporting another user or the “eyes” of the algorithms, they can indeed be seen as breaking the Community Guidelines.

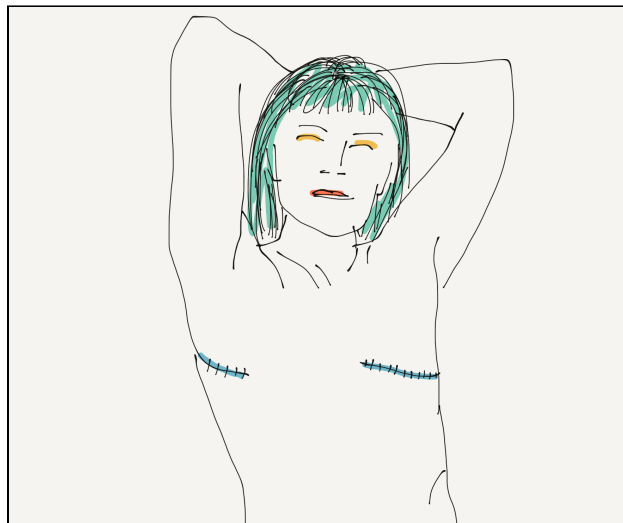
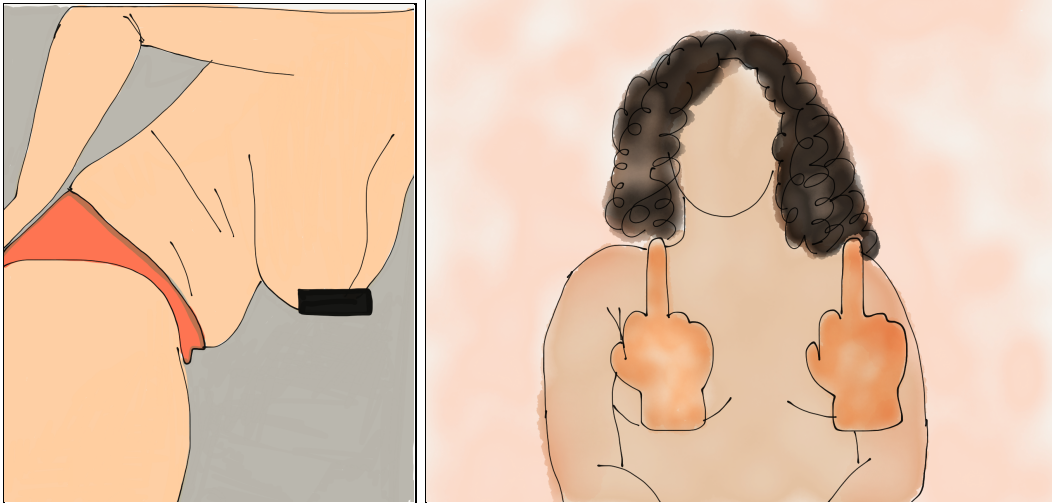
First of all many users try to oppose algorithmic detection through what Cobbe called everyday resistance, small-scale actions to undermine algorithmic systems. Several users opposed censorship through their art. Wanting to promote normalisation of female nipples, different body sizes, living with scars, body acceptance and so forth most of them found it easier to post and keep the posts “alive” by illustrating the body. Here are some example posts:

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<sup>99</sup> Mark Zuckerberg is currently the chairman, chief executive officer, and controlling shareholder of Meta Platforms, the technology conglomerate and the parent organisation of Instagram.



Then there were also, of course, users posting uncensored photos of their bodies, but these posts were expected to be taken down, so most users covered parts of their body with clothing, underwear or objects. Altering images was an opportunity for users to be ironic or humorous, for example covering body parts with the use of emojis or making characters out of their breasts:



However, the need to cover parts of the body left some followers and users confused as to why people protesting against unfair content moderation are censoring their own photos:

**@userss** then why do you censor your nipples?  
**@user** good arguments... but why are you censoring your body in this post?  
**@userrr** why are u guys hiding then?  
**@user1** @userrr i'm annoyed to admit that i self-censored this image so that i won't be penalized. The irony is not lost on me

Also mentioned by Cobbe, another tactic of opposition is the altering of speech and language in order to not be detected by the algorithm. The word censorship is altered into “c3nrsrshp”,

“cnsrshp” or “censor-ship”, and sexual into “s3exual” “sxl” “s\*xual” among other abbreviations and reconfigurations of perceived triggering words. It is the theory of shadowbanning that informs the users of which words might trigger algorithmic censorship, users understanding that “borderline content” is especially triggered by bodies, nudity and sexuality.

@**user123** with the impending (unethical) updates to insta many in this space alter their speech, language, and images to accommodate to the guidelines.  
@**userr** how do i lift a sh-adow-ban? (words trigger too!!!)  
@**\_us\_er** by cnsring our bodies on percieved gender, instagram participating in discrimination.  
@**uuser** female bodies are more likely to be removed for “nooditie” or “sxl activity” according to IG’s guidelines.  
@**user33** artists on IG are facing accusations of “sxl solicitashun” as part f a new way of account deletions (misspelling so i wont get cnsrd)

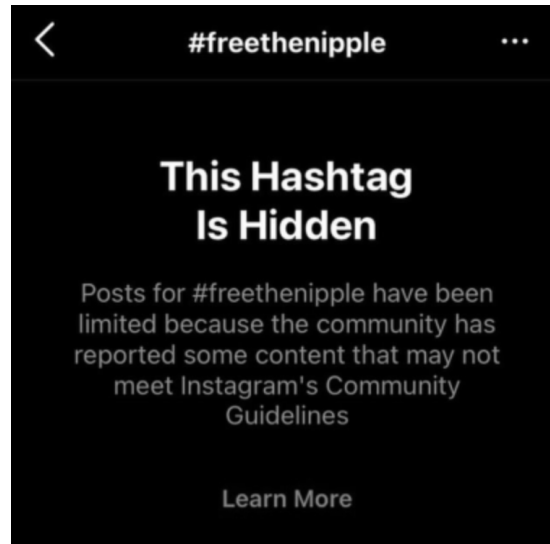
Common among all the users were the tactics of “tagging” and “hashtagging”. The former refers to a word or phrase preceded by a hash mark used to enable cross-referencing of content by theme or topic. For example, a search for the hashtag #flower returns all posts that have been tagged with that term. Hashtags help users find content of similar interests and may also be used informally to provide context around a given message, thus serving as a reflexive meta-commentary.<sup>100</sup> Hashtags can help express contextual cues or offer more depth to the information or message that appears with the hashtag. The use of hashtags can also reveals what feelings or sentiment an author attaches to a statement, sort of the users coding their own statements:

#Feminizm #FreeTheNipple #Fr33th3nippl3 #InstagramCensorshipdMe #BodyAcceptancee #Fukinsta  
#Angry #MyBodyNotYours #BreastCancerRepresentation #Representatiion #BeautifulNoMatterWhat  
#MentalHealth #Shadowbann3d #BlockedAgain

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<sup>100</sup> Peter Wikström. "#srynotfunny: Communicative Functions of Hashtags on Twitter," *SKY Journal of Linguistics* 27 (2014), p. 127.

Political protests and campaigns in recent years have been organised around hashtags or have made extensive usage of hashtags for the promotion of critical discussion.<sup>101</sup> This has made hashtags important means to promote political topics. If it is decided a hashtag is used to publish content that violates the Community Guidelines on Instagram, the hashtag is restricted or removed. This is what has happened with the hashtag #freethenipple on Instagram:



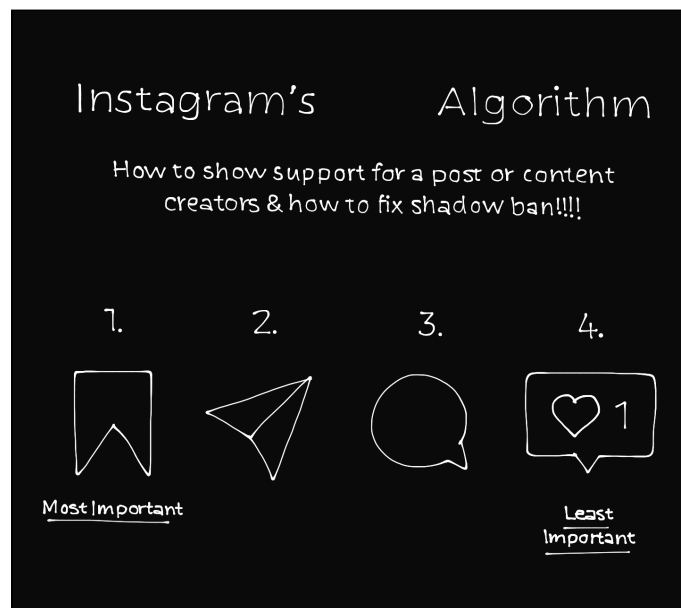
Even though the hashtag is “Hidden” on Instagram, I found that many users still use it as a symbolic gesture of opposition. Also variants of #freethenipple have been created to keep connecting people with the same political beliefs and keep the movement alive. In addition to hashtagging was also the tactic of tagging popular accounts, celebrities, and accounts with the same political orientation. The accounts tagged in posts didn’t have to be relevant to the post, rather it was seen as advantageous to be associated with a popular account. The hope was to be “re-posted”, acknowledged and made visible by these accounts. I call this tactic of tagging “symbolic value transfer,” tagging accounts in hope of taking part of someone else's value, that being visibility.

In addition to everyday resistance, there were also users who tried to call for organised resistance, that is a collective response to the perceived unfair censorship. One way this is done is through trying to educate other users as to how the algorithm works, urging them to train the

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<sup>101</sup> See the term “hashtag activism” for more information about the use of hashtags in social movements. Some prominent examples are #metoo, #blacklivesmatter and #fridaysforfuture.

algorithm in accordance with this knowledge, similar to Karizat et al. (2021) and their findings of TikTok users engaging in content strategically. The users of Instagram created guides on “how to fix shadow ban” and informative content on how the algorithm works. There is a kind of urgency and stress surrounding these types of guides, where users ask their followers to be aware of sudden changes in experience, its algorithms or Community Guidelines. It is not so much a feeling of “what if ” they will sweep the rug from underneath us, rather a sensing of “it is inevitably going to happen to my account so my followers need to be prepared.”



In relation to users creating guides and trying to educate each other, there were some users trying to organise protests online and offline. One way to try and promote collective action and to get the users' voices heard was through writing public letters and petitions addressed to Instagram and Mark Zuckerberg with the demand for change. With the intention to “raise awareness of unfair censorship online and ignite change” users were asked to sign their petition to hand it in to the company. Collective action was also tried by users starting hashtag campaigns, trying to get their followers to join in and share content with their self-made hashtag. These posts were captioned with messages addressed to Instagram and a call for action among their followers. Here we can see several tactics combined into one, namely collective protest, with one example message being:



Dear instagram, over the past year many of us have noticed a huge change in this platform. Particularly how little posts are shown, especially amongst us women with normbreaking bodies. Instagram shadow-ban, report, censor and block our photos. It is not uncommon for our posts to be taken down. We work tirelessly to raise awareness and break the stigma of not having the so-called "perfect" body.

My plan is to talk to Instagram and explain what true inclusion and diversity of ALL bodies mean so they can change their algorithms and guidelines. To ask for representation on social media and show that all bodies matter. I'm not one to sit around and I'm putting myself and my account at risk. That's why I need YOU to support this campaign. Support my campaign by sharing your photos in your posts and stories, tagg influential people, and use the hashtag #stopstopstop. Let's stand together!!!!

This excerpt of data quite perfectly illustrates the nature of tactics: defiant not subversive. All of the tactics above can only make use of the same properties or "products" given to them in the platform and appropriate them to take up what they believe are their rightful space. This can be seen as restricted and limiting as the users themselves do not produce the strategies controlling this place, and therefore do not have the knowledge of how it truly operates. The users can only testify to the consequences of those strategies and try to manoeuvre their effects. Once again, proving that tactics are not externally offensive, rather operates from inside the nest of control.

The users trying to organise forms of collective resistance aims to better the platform. They still see Instagram as "beneficial," a place where people can find communities and belonging, and in sharing pictures and stories, users can empower, inspire and help each other. Despite struggles with censorship, social media is argued to be a "powerful tool" to break stigmas and raise awareness. As a suggestion, this may be because the users in this study have found success in building a following and formulating a community on the same platform they are criticising. Only a few observed users discussed the possibility to opt out of the platform, moving on to one matching one's needs. Some promoted the web service Flickr or the platform Patreon, with one user suggesting that "if this app limits us, we need to seek other options that don't limit us." However, with no boycotts in sight, the majority of the users want to work collaboratively with the company to "help" them understand diversity and inclusion of all bodies and bring about a change that Instagram can, as one user said, be "rewarded for doing." Speaking to the company, users frame the issue as an opportunity for Instagram to be "revolutionary." The tactics of opposition then, paradoxically, aim to enable people to stay on the app, as Manell

pointed out. However, users' tactics of opposition bring light to believed partiality of algorithmic censorship and control, perhaps being the limit as to what tactics can achieve within places of domination. The last section of the analysis will be dedicated to depict what this partiality means to this study's users, why they believe that they are being censored, and how these beliefs of bias also can inform their tactics of opposition.

### 6.3 Algorithmic folk beliefs

**@userr** the most important question is WHY? It's the question we ask ourselves when we are being censored, assuming that we have done something wrong – afraid to lose access to this platform. Then being censored again and again, beginning to question the nature of the censorship. WHY? is my body treated differently from a man's with the same body parts? WHY? does the patriarchy erase us and shame us? KEEP ASKING WHY?!

Following the realisation that one's content is being censored, and with that having to find tactics to oppose moderation, the user is left wondering why they are repeatedly targeted. As understood thus far, the users' are left to answer this question themselves. Not only for understanding how the algorithms work through algorithmic folk theories, but also *why* users are being repeatedly censored. This interestingly gives room for what I will call “algorithmic folk beliefs”, meaning explanations and beliefs as to why certain groups of users are being censored. These beliefs, I argue, are an intrinsic part of the tactics of the users, and can be viewed as providing an extension to the users' folk theories. As this first excerpt of data above shows, censorship is in part explained by the belief that the algorithms perform a double standard of different treatment of users based on gender. Women's bodies are judged, controlled and censored, while men's are accepted on the platform. This being, as one user stated, “the double standards and dichotomy of our patriarchal society.”

Double standards are a common denominator for the users' beliefs as to why female users are being censored. Users feel that the targeted censorship of the female body is in great contrast with hyper-sexualized posts by celebrities and popular brands on the platform. They seem to

have no problem with posting underwear products or bikini-pictures from vacations. This provides another belief that the platform's algorithms functions are based on monetary exchange. Since the users targeted do not pay for advertisements nor collaborate with the platform professionally, they are not as economically valuable, and therefore not excused to bend the guidelines. Through this critique users recognise for the first time that the social media platform is part of a business:

@user i can go to many celebrities accounts and they are showing nipples and nudity and insta does nothing!! Somebody make it make sense!!

@userr12 they only block small businesses! Look at international brands who can do ads and post whatever they like. It's BS!!!

@useruser it is so bizarre and sad how commodified and vilified our bodies have become. Body policing is so sick and only used for control and to sell products!!!

@user\_1 i don't understand how companies get past the algorithm? Their feeds are full of "sexy" images that haven't been taken down.

What is evident is that the folk theory is connected to the folk beliefs, that is *how* the algorithm works is also connected with explaining *why* it works in that way. The double standards of the algorithms informs shadowbanning of non-commercial and minority users. The algorithmic censorship is then viewed as embodying and mediating standards of society, or as one user put it, "plays god when it comes to the female body." Through algorithmic folk beliefs algorithms are ascribed judgemental abilities as to what is good and bad. Ultimately, yes, it is what the algorithms are supposed to do. They are supposed to, in compliance with the Community Guidelines, decide what content is appropriate and acceptable. Control of the platform is, however, equated with norms, rules and laws in the "offline" world. Algorithms are believed to hierarchise bodies and have the power to prescribe what body is acceptable. Through this belief, algorithms quite drastically go from being seen as simply technological tools for a company to control a place, to being moral entities capable of being sexist and misogynistic.

**@user456** why? Because algorithms deem women in underwear sexy, and not even that just fully covered and still sexual.

**@useruser** how does instagram decide if it is a woman's nipple or if it is someone who does not identify as female?

**@\_user** the sexualisation of your body should only come with your intent and consent!!

**@4user5** we have the right to be neutral or sexual on our own terms!!!

By shadowbanning, blocking or restricting female users, Instagram is rendering their body or particular bodyparts as exclusively sexual. Therein the algorithm forcibly sexualises and genders the users without their consent, causing users to protest that they can be nude without being sexual, and that censoring them encourages sexualisation and objectification of women. Censorship here is experienced as taking bodily autonomy away from users and instead deems it to belong to society. Tactics of opposition are then fueled by taking a stance against specific societal norms and perceptions that are viewed as inherent in strategies of the platform. More-specifically, the “hypocritical sexist Community Guidelines” and “judgy algorithms”. It is these algorithmic folk beliefs that inform the users as to why they are experiencing repeated censorship. The believed inherent double standards and sexist bias in the algorithms shames and objectifies the women’s bodies, reducing them to a sex object. This understanding of why they are being censored complements the algorithmic folk theories of shadowbanning and informs reactions and tactics of opposition.

## 7. Discussion

From the users’ point of view algorithms perform unrighteous and biased censorship, being technical actors informed by societal values and norms, dictating how the female body should and can be represented. Throughout the analysis, folk theories and folk beliefs are argued to inform various tactics of opposition for users to stay on the platform and continue to share content of the female body in spite of algorithmic censorship. The ultimate form of opposition

would perhaps be to remove oneself from the platform. Yet, as asked in the beginning of this thesis, how easy is it to actually escape technological control in contemporary everyday life? While this is not a question I pursued, it is worth noting as an opportunity for future work.

It is especially sociologically interesting to examine how groups of a place try to negotiate norms and rules in that same environment in trying to take up space. It is, going back to basics, these relations between strategies and tactics, or structures and individuals, that make up everyday life. Also, this everyday life is increasingly and dramatically both human and non-human, technological and natural, where communities exist both online and offline. The already offline societal power structures seem to follow the individuals into online worlds as they become users. Whether censorship is something good or bad has yet to be definitely answered, and I don't believe that is what will be established here. From the users' point of view in this study censorship can be limiting and discriminatory. For others, perhaps companies or "guideline-abiding" users, censorship is beneficial to ensure control or safety over online spaces. It is indeed exhausting and resource consuming to oppose societal structures, strategies, or algorithms but what de Certeau so fittingly brought to light is that there is still room for appropriation in the everyday. Even though tactics are not revolutionary or system shattering they make the everyday life manageable, and show the daily negotiations of space that occur in social life.

As automated technologies are further employed to organise and govern societies, both online and offline, it is important to highlight the contextual and lived realities of such controlled users in their environment. The establishment and policing of norms and laws via algorithms will inevitably result in disagreements and power asymmetries that affect the relationship between, for instance, citizens and governments, students and schools, or users and platforms. By exploring this through the eyes of the users, in the midst of negotiations of space, one can examine how these relations are challenged through tactics of opposition, folk theories and beliefs, scratching the surface as to what automated control may in practice imply for online social life.

## 8. Conclusion

At the beginning of the thesis, an introduction to algorithmic content moderation on social platforms was accounted for, with the focus being on the socio-technical arrangements of algorithmic systems. Far from being merely technical and therefore neutral, algorithms can be viewed as actively participating in social contexts and having the capability to reinforce and reproduce specific social orders. They rule as such, discreetly, in the background of sociality, as “black boxes”, not easily understood or depicted. The purpose of the thesis was to examine the possibility for users of having agency within a platform mediated by algorithmic systems, focusing on Instagram’s controversial censorship of the female body, and how users may oppose the platform's content moderation. The research questions were the following: first, how do Instagram users experience algorithmic censorship of the female body on Instagram? Second, what tactics do they employ to continue using the app for posting about the female body? Third, why do the Instagram users believe that they are being censored?

To answer the research questions I firstly built a conceptual framework using previous research centred on the concepts of “shadowbanning” and “algorithmic folk theory”. Shadowbanning is what users refer to when, without notice or consent, a user’s posts and/or accounts stop appearing in the public spaces on Instagram. The notion of shadowbanning can be seen as a form of algorithmic folk theory, through which users try to explain how the algorithms of Instagram works. The shadowbanning dispute between users and Instagram, regarding whether a shadowban is real, exposes the fragile state of users’ capacity to generate credible claims about algorithmic censorship. Continuing, I made use of de Certeau's theorisation of the concepts "strategies" and "tactics". It was argued that users' opposition to algorithmic censorship can be understood as “tactics of opposition,” meaning appropriations of the platforms affordances to evade censorship.

The thesis examined how users employ tactics of opposition by looking at user behaviour from a qualitative and passive netnographic perspective. While useful for understanding discourses about algorithmic systems, this methodological approach does not allow for an understanding of the computational aspect of user-algorithm interactions. Nor knowledge of how Instagram as a company views its algorithms and Community Guidelines in relation to the

female body. Rather the analysis is user-centric, looking through the eyes of the users, to examine how the users think of, act on, and oppose algorithmic censorship.

Firstly, the users experienced algorithmic censorship through what they themselves called “shadowbanning” and being “blocked”. For the most part this relates to content being censored or “hidden” after being deemed “inappropriate” or “sexual” in reference to Instagram’s Community Guidelines. Users’ posts were not showing up under public pages, or were instantly removed upon posting, and posts could not be shared by other users. Certain content was also marked by Instagram as “sensitive”, being also a way in which users experienced censorship. However, this type of censorship is not purely algorithmically enforced, proving that content moderation also depends on users reporting other users' content. Not considered in previous studies is that users expect not to be censored because of their kind-hearted agendas to spread knowledge and empowerment to their followerbase. When these users are repeatedly censored, the censorship is seen to be informed by both the identity of the users and hindering the “cause” being promoted by them.

Secondly, the users, determined not to stop posting content of female-presented bodies, try to find ways to bypass or evade algorithmic censorship. These actions are conceptualised as “tactics of opposition”. Some tactics were small-scale, such as those trying to deceive the algorithm through the use of artistic expression. Other users covered parts of their bodies with clothing, underwear or objects. Altering images in this way was an opportunity for users to be ironic or humanistic, for instance through using expressive emojis to cover up body parts. Another tactic of opposition was the altering of speech and language in order to not be detected by the algorithm. It is the theory of shadowbanning that informs the users of which words might trigger the algorithm, understanding that “borderline content” is especially triggered by female bodies, nudity and sexuality. In addition, common to all users was the tactics of “hashtagging” and “tagging”. Hashtags were used to relate posts to certain themes and political beliefs and gain visibility on hashtag pages. Also, by tagging popular accounts users were hoping to gain recognition and thereby visibility.

Some users also tried to organise collective tactics of opposition, for a united response to the perceived unfair censorship. Educational content about the algorithms of Instagram and guides were created intended to be shared among user communities. Some users wrote open letters to Instagram hoping to gather enough co-signs by followers to be recognised, and some

started hashtag campaigns. These forms of organised resistance aimed to better the platform. The users still saw Instagram as beneficial, a place where people can find belonging, and therefore had no plan to leave the platform despite struggles with algorithmic censorship. This might have been because the users in this study have found success in building a following and formulating a community on the same platform they are criticising. The tactics of opposition then, paradoxically, aim to enable people to stay on the app. However, users' tactics of opposition bring light to believed partiality of algorithmic censorship and control, perhaps being the limit as to what tactics can achieve within places of domination and control.

Finally, to answer the third research question, there was a need to contribute to previous research and conceptualisations. Not only did the users theorise as to how the algorithms of Instagram work, but also expressed *why* they believed they were being repeatedly targeted and censored. This interestingly gives room for what I called “algorithmic folk beliefs,” meaning explanations and beliefs as to why certain groups of users are being censored. The algorithmic censorship is in part explained by the beliefs that algorithms reinforce a double standard of different treatment of users based on gender and economical value. Tactics of opposition are then fueled by taking a stance against specific societal norms and perceptions that are viewed as inherent in strategies and algorithms of the platform.

From the users point of view algorithms enforce unrighteous and biased censorship, being technical actors informed by societal values and norms, dictating how the female body should and can be represented. Throughout the analysis, folk theories and folk beliefs are argued to inform various tactics of opposition for users to stay on the platform and continue to share content of the female body in spite of algorithmic censorship. Contributing to a novel multidisciplinary field of critical algorithm studies, this thesis can be seen as opening the door to what can be sociologically studied about algorithmic control. Future research on the same topic, or a continuation of this study, could interview platform users in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of how they view algorithmic censorship and the possibility to oppose social media platforms in productive ways. It would also be of interest to ask the same of representatives from Instagram, making an effort to highlight both sides of the dispute. To this, user-centric research could focus on a specific user group to see more specifically how algorithmic folk beliefs and tactics of opposition are informed by ideas of identity.



Lastly, the most intriguing aspect of this thesis has been to open my eyes to the union of technological and social worlds, of online and offline social dilemmas, merging and forming both new and familiar social places and struggles for visibility and control. It is important to recognise that everyday life is increasingly and dramatically both human and non-human, both automated and spontaneous, expanding on what we call social life, something that inevitably needs to be explored further.

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