



LUND UNIVERSITY

Unveiling Power Dynamics on Instagram

*A Neo-medieval Analysis of Algorithmic control,
Influencers and Users*

Femke Podsedkowska

Master of Applied Cultural Analysis
Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences
TKAM01 - Spring 2023

Supervisors
Gabriella Nilsson

Abstract

Instagram is a large social media platform with strong power dynamics between the company, influencers and the users. Exploring this power dynamic within a theoretical framework rooted in neo-medievalism, this study investigates how power structures are manifested and enacted on the platform. The central research question focuses on the exercise of power from both hierarchical positions: from above through regulations, guidelines, and algorithms, and from below through methods such as public shaming. To address these research questions, three distinct types of material were analyzed, capturing the upward and downward power dynamics within Instagram. Additionally, the study examined the strategies employed by influencers, and the tools utilized by users to control and influence the behavior of influencers. The research objectives were further refined into specific questions concerning the power methods employed by Instagram through their Terms and Conditions, the effects on influencers and their adaptive behaviors within the platform, and the methods employed by followers in practicing power through comment sections.

The findings of the study highlight the resonance between power practices on social media and those observed in medieval contexts. Power is exercised from above through regulatory changes and the enigmatic and ever-changing algorithm, ultimately controlled by Instagram. This distribution of digital space mirrors the medieval kingdom, where influencers hold limited control over their assigned territories while the ultimate authority remains with the platform itself. Consequently, influencers' ability to monetize their digital space is constrained by Instagram's restrictive actions. Furthermore, the study illuminates how power is exercised from below, with followers employing methods such as cyber vigilantism, mob-culture, and public shaming to assert influence. The vulnerability of influencers becomes evident as they are subject to algorithmic mechanisms and the pervasive effects of ridicule and cancel culture, despite their apparent advantages in terms of income, branding, and follower count. In conclusion, this study emphasizes the limited agency of influencers within the platform and the practices of power exerted by users through various means. By unraveling these power dynamics, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities and implications of power on social media platforms.

Keywords: Digital feudalism; social media; power relations; Instagram; influencers; medievalism; algorithms

Table of contents

1. Introduction.....	3
1.1 Background and context.....	3
1.2 Aim and research questions.....	6
1.3 Overview.....	6
2. Methods and material.....	7
2.1 Methods.....	7
2.2 Material.....	8
2.2.1 Power from above.....	8
2.2.2 In between.....	9
2.2.3 Power from below.....	11
2.3 Limitations.....	12
3. Theoretical framework.....	14
3.1 Digital Feudalism as a theoretical model.....	14
3.1.1 Feudalism, manorialism and medievalism.....	14
3.1.2 Digital feudalism.....	15
3.1.1 Operationalization.....	17
4. State of the art.....	19
4.1 Techno feudalism.....	19
4.2 Invisible power.....	20
4.3 Public humiliation.....	22
4.3.1 Cancel culture.....	24
5. Analysis.....	27
5.1 Power from above.....	27
5.1.1 The kingdom.....	27
5.1.2 The gentry.....	33
5.1.2.1 Invisible power.....	34
5.1.2.2 Structural power.....	37
5.1.2.3 Tactics.....	42
5.2 Power from below.....	47
5.2.1 The peasant uprising.....	47
5.2.1.1 The watch keepers.....	49
5.2.1.2 The ducking stool.....	53
5.2.1.2 Mobilizing the masses.....	60
6. Conclusion.....	65
6.1 Summary.....	65
6.2 Discussion.....	66
6.3 Applicability.....	70
References.....	72
Material.....	72
Sources.....	72
Literature.....	73

1. Introduction

In recent years, social media platforms have become a significant driving force in shaping public discourse and cultural norms. Instagram, in particular, has gained massive popularity among the younger generation and has been increasingly used for communication, information sharing, and entertainment. However, Instagram is not just a platform for sharing content, it has also become a battleground for power struggles, cultural wars, and cancel culture. Given the increasing influence and impact of cancel culture within the context of Instagram, it becomes crucial to investigate this phenomenon comprehensively. A thorough examination can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of power at play, shedding light on how rules, algorithms, and collective actions shape the experiences and interactions of users on the platform. By delving into the complexities and consequences of cancel culture on Instagram, I aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of this contemporary social phenomenon, its implications for both individuals and society, and the potential ways to mitigate its negative effects.

1.1 Background and context

The internet is considered the most participatory digital medium ever developed, with the number of platforms having significantly increased in the last decade. The digital realm consists of diverse stakeholders and participants, ranging from physical infrastructure to users, and operates as an ecosystem that relies on the participation of various actors and involves numerous dependencies (Jensen, 2020). The constantly evolving and complex nature of the internet has led to the emergence of a multitude of power exercises. Despite being the epitome of modern civilization, the internet paradoxically facilitates practices of enclosure, censorship, and social control (Jensen, 2020). The digital space is used in the service of democracy and freedom movements around the world, but also by dictatorships that censor and practice social control. Modernity is usually related to a progressive and inclusive society which is contradictory to the facilitated censorship that is ongoing online. The unregulated, free nature of the internet is compromised, and it is currently dominated by the big five - Apple, Microsoft, Meta, Google, and Amazon - who compete for users' attention and content consumption using power to reward different actors in a manner akin to feudal structures that governed society 1000 years ago (Jensen, 2020). The digital technologies were meant to enhance social life, social skills and mutual cooperation but have come to set us apart from each other (Jensen, 2020). The democratic potential of the internet and social media is under

threat from structural changes that, if left unsupervised, may lead to a power shift of the internet (Meinrath et al., 2011, Jensen 2020). The impact of information technology on communication has created an open channel between people worldwide, making the world appear smaller by ease of communication.

In 2016, the social media platform Instagram announced that they would change the users' feed to include an algorithmic ranking to the platform's main feed to customize the content (Instagram, 2016). Although, Instagram didn't refer to algorithms specifically and has continued to share very few details about the algorithmical architecture or how it works (Cotter, 2019). Algorithms function behind the scenes with most of the users unaware of its presence or purpose (Gillespie, 2014). Although they play a significant role in our daily online experiences and determine who and what gains visibility on social media by establishing the conditions and serve as disciplinary apparatuses that prescribe participatory norms (Gillespie, 2014, Bucher, 2012). By observing the content and the users that attain exposure, the algorithm rewards users with visibility that are distinguished as abiding to the collective conventions (Bucher, 2019). Despite the increasing concern over the influential role of algorithms in shaping social realities, limited research has focused on the processes of knowledge building and interpretation associated with algorithms (Cotter, 2019). This gap in research hinders our understanding of the intricate nature and extent of algorithmic power.

With the rise of social media, influencers have amassed large followings and established themselves as trusted voices in their respective fields or niches. An influencer is a person who has a significant following on social media platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok, and makes a living creating content on social media (Cotter, 2019). They may work with brands to promote products or services to their followers in exchange for compensation, which can include monetary payment or free products and are often seen as trusted sources of information as they often have a significant impact on consumer behavior (Cotten, 2019). As a result, they have become powerful marketing tools for brands looking to promote their products or services. Through their effective influence on the platform users, influencers often achieve a celebrity status within their communities (Cotter, 2019). They can create content that is engaging and relevant to their followers, which can help to increase engagement and encourage brand loyalty. As rulers of small pieces of the Instagram realm, influencers are subjected to public opinion for better or worse.

The rise of cancel culture on Instagram has been a controversial topic, with many arguing that it has led to a toxic and oppressive culture that stifles free speech and expression (Mueller, 2021). Cancel culture is a social phenomenon that involves calling out individuals or groups who are deemed to have engaged in unacceptable behavior, leading to their public shaming, ostracization, and even job loss (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022, Ng 2022, Mueller, 2021). The cancel practice has emerged as a prominent circumstance in recent years, gaining momentum and widespread attention in various spheres of society (Öhman, Nakajima, 2022). The practice of "canceling" individuals or entities involves publicly denouncing and boycotting them due to their alleged offensive actions, statements, or demeanor (Mueller, 2021, p. 2). This form of collective action aims to hold individuals accountable for their actions and impose social consequences, often leading to severe repercussions on their personal and professional lives (Mueller, 2021). One arena that has become a fertile ground for cancel culture is the realm of social media, particularly platforms like Instagram. Instagram provides a virtually uncontrolled environment where individuals can operate beyond the traditional legal frameworks and regulations that govern society. This unbridled nature of Instagram presents a unique challenge, as it is detached from the established norms and rules of the physical world while simultaneously serving as a significant aspect of our daily reality for the millions who engage with it regularly. Power dynamics within Instagram are multifaceted, encompassing both the influence of rules and algorithms implemented by the platform and the actions and behaviors of its users (Gillespie, 2014). Instagram's evolution is gradually shifting the power moving it to a centralized authority reminiscent of a feudal power system. The unequal distribution of power is characterized by the concentration of influence in the hands of a few dominant entities, while others are subject to their control and rules.

1.2 Aim and research questions

The aim with this thesis is to investigate the existing power dynamics and interactions among social media users on Instagram. It specifically focuses on studying the influence exerted on influencers through changes and regulations and the subsequent modifications in their behavior, adoption of new strategies and adjustments in their content. Additionally, this research seeks to explore the tools and tactics employed by users of Instagram to assert control over influencers.

The aims will be addressed through the following questions:

1. How is power practiced from above through regulations and changes made by Instagram?
 - a) What types of power methods does Instagram utilize by demanding that users accept their Terms and Conditions?
 - b) In what ways are influencers affected by Instagram's regulations and changes and alter their behavior trying to operate their business on Instagrams platform?
2. How is power practiced from below and what methods are used by Instagram users when practicing power upwards in the comment sections?

1.3 Overview

The structure of this thesis comprises 6 chapters, starting with this introductory chapter, which presents the research questions and objectives. In the second chapter the materials and methods used in the study are introduced, along with a definition of the field and reflections on ethical and methodological choices. The third chapter introduces the theoretical framework of affect theory, primarily grounded on the works of Umberto Eco, and other perspectives on power, digital feudalism and neo-medievalism. The fourth chapter contextualizes the thesis by providing a review of previous research in techno feudalism, algorithms and public humiliation. In chapter five, analysis combines the theoretical and methodological approaches with my own reflection of the material. To adequately analyze the extensive field material received, the analysis is divided into two subchapters: Power from above and from below. This structural echo aims to enhance the readability and accessibility of the text, ensuring that the empirical material, theoretical grounding points, and methodological choices are in symbiosis.

2. Methods and material

2.1 Methods

In the digital age, cultural analysts face the challenge of redefining the sociological and anthropological project in the context of new technologies (Collins and Slover Durlington, 2015). The definition of social media has become a critical issue due to the diverse interpretations associated with it, the concept is related to specific platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook (McCay-Peet and Quan Haase, 2017). Instagram is a global social media phenomenon with over 95 million photos and video clips uploaded daily (Roberts, 2018). Studying social media is both unique and not uncommon as it is a part of the daily lives of millions of people and many are dependent on it for communication, income and social interactions (Kozinets, 2021). Personal experiences with social media can bring advantages and disadvantages to research. While it may present limitations due to personal biases, it can also provide valuable insights into the topic. As a researcher, I will draw upon my reflections of the platform as a background, but will not present my own personal experiences of Instagram in the study even though my own position as an active user of social media will be inevitable to include.

To fully grasp how power is executed on the social media platform Instagram from three different directions, I have chosen to do a multi methods study where I combine text analysis, interviews and netnography. These three methods are essential to study the power movement: the absolute power is only shown through the texts in the Terms and Conditions, otherwise it is invisible and divine. In the interviews with the influencers, it is shown how they act and relate to the power aimed towards them (from above) through stories about the invisible (algorithms). The power from the masses is shown in the methods the users use in the comment sections on Instagram where they have the possibility to make their voices heard in a public space. To study the comment sections I have used netnography, a research method that involves the study of online communities, interactions, and cultures through the analysis of internet-based data (Kozinets, 2021). It is a qualitative approach that draws upon ethnographic principles and techniques to explore social phenomena occurring within virtual spaces (Kozinets, 2021). Netnography has allowed me to examine the behavior, relationships, language, and cultural practices of individuals or groups within the digital environments of Instagram. Kozinets (2021) writes that researchers often immerse themselves in these online communities, observing and documenting the interactions and dynamics that unfold within them. As a daily user of the platform - I have used my own experience and expertise to

navigate through Instagram's social media landscape. This method has enabled me to gain insights into the lived experiences, perspectives, and social structures that shape online communities and helped uncover patterns, norms, and cultural dynamics unique to these digital spaces, as well as understand the influence of technology on social interactions and identities (Kozinets, 2021).

2.2 Material

I have chosen three different types of material to portray how the power flows from above and from below. The material consists of (1) the Terms and Conditions of Instagram - the above perspective, (2) interviews with micro influencers - the inbetween perspective, and (3) the comments on the influencer Margaux Dietz posts - the from below perspective.

2.2.1 Power from above

Instagram is a free mobile application dedicated to distributing and sharing photos and videos. The application was launched 2010 and requires a smartphone (Roberts 2018). The platform allows the user to take photos, edit it and then share it in the feed. The user can add a caption and mark it with hashtags or a geographical site to make it more searchable for other users. In August, 2016, a new function was added called Instagram Stories which implies that the user can add pictures or videos that disappear 24 hours after the publication. In Sweden 2021, 64 % of all internet users stated that they had used Instagram in the past year and 48 % used it daily (Internetstiftelsen 2022). The most usual activity for Swedish users 2022 was looking at Instagram posts (88%), looking at Stories (55%) and posting pictures (46%) (Internetstiftelsen 2022). To join Instagram, all users have to consent to follow the Terms and Conditions of the platform. Instagram is one of the world's biggest social phenomena, and like all big and public platforms, Instagram surveil and regulates the content of its users (Roberts 2018). Instagram does this by a set of rules (community rules) that controls the users' activities on the platform (Roberts 2018). The platform reserves the sole right to apply these rules that they see fitting and consistent with the platform's interpretation. To access the material I have used my own Instagram account and read the Terms and Conditions, including the community guidelines through the application. These regulations are designed to ensure that users are not engaging in harmful behavior, including hate speech, harassment, and the posting of inappropriate content. According to the Terms and Conditions on Instagram, users are prohibited from engaging in a variety of behaviors that I will discuss further in the analysis section.

I have done a close reading and content analysis of the Terms and Conditions of Instagram both in Swedish and in English during March 2023 to investigate how the platform practices power over its users, both influencers and followers. The texts that will be used in this study are updated 26th of July 2022 and are in Swedish, this is because of my own private settings on Instagram. I wanted to access the texts through my own account to get the insight of a user's experience. I have set the language to Swedish on Instagram and therefore the material has been carefully translated by me and compared with the English texts to be as accurate as possible. If any differences were observed between the Terms and Conditions in Swedish and English, that was noted, but nothing of the sort has occurred. Instagram states that the User's Terms and Conditions will be updated and that the changes take effect 5th of July 2023. The new terms are available to read but they will not be included in my material. I have read the texts in its entirety which contain approximately 3500 words, and 15 pages. The extent of the material makes it inaccessible for most users, with that said, the guidelines are very easy to access online or through the application and the language is approachable and easy to read.

2.2.2 In between

This part of the material that builds this study consists of interviews conducted within the project *Influencers life worlds. New work in a changeable time* (Influencers livsvärldar. Nytt arbete i en föränderlig tid) during 2021 and 2022, and were ethically tested for the research project they were conducted in. The interviews were collected for a pre-study that was conducted during the winter of 2022 when I wrote an article about influencers' relation to the algorithms. I asked to use the material from the project owner, Gabriella Nilsson, a researcher and prefect at the Department of Arts and Cultural Science at Lunds University. I received 15 pages of transcribed material that the interviewer within the project saw fitting and contained "relevance in relation to social platforms' regulations, changes and algorithms." The quotes that form the basis are taken from 19 deep interviews with 12 micro influencers (social media influencers with less than 20 000 followers on Instagram). The micro influencers have a relatively small number of followers and are considered to have a more authentic, reliable and close relation to their followers (Cotter, 2019). The interviews were not conducted by myself and had the sole purpose to investigate social media influencers and their relation to their work on social media. It has to be taken into consideration that I have selected quotes and answers from the interviews that I saw fitting for the purpose of this study. With the interviews as a starting point, I have scrutinized how the informants regulate and change their behavior in relation to the power that is exercised from Instagram through algorithmical

changes and platform regulation. All informants were active on Instagram when the interviews took place, and all of them had different aims with their influencership. Some are full time influencers, meaning that it is their main profession and they don't work with anything else. Others consider their influencership as an extra job and have another source of income. All informants are female and aged between 25 and 40 years old. They got contacted through Instagram's direct message (DM) or through email. The interviews lasted between 1 and 4 hours each and were conducted in Swedish and later transcribed into Swedish. The material that constitutes this study has been translated to English by me. In order to address the inquiry regarding the exercise of power from above and the implementation of strategies, a thematic analysis has been conducted on the collected material. I have located keywords in the interviews and sorted them into themes. Firstly, there are parts where the informants discuss Instagram in negative or positive terms, the impact Instagram as a platform has had on their business and how rules or regulations have affected their cooperation. Secondly, I have focused on parts where they bring up algorithms and the impact they have on the influencers visibility and presence on Instagram. Finally, I have identified where the informants have noticed a difference in the digital architecture of Instagram related to algorithms but also changes in the Terms and Conditions - and how the informants have had to recount to that difference.

As a Swedish native speaker the core meaning has been carefully taken into consideration when translating. As the interviews were not conducted by me, I have not been able to steer the conversation or ask follow up questions that might have been of value for this thesis. I have not transcribed the interviews myself and have therefore not accredited the analytical process which a transcription involves. The absence of transliteration in my research signifies a gap in the analysis, as it prevents me from capturing an essential aspect of the study. This limitation means that I have been unable to delve into the intricacies of voice modes, facial expressions, and other interactions that exist within the research context during an interview. Relying solely on the transcribed interviews as a data source has further contributed to a lack of proximity to the informants, thereby resulting in a partial understanding of the broader contextual factors. However, this detachment has also allowed for a degree of objectivity in the analysis process as the informants are as anonymous to me, as they are for the readers of this thesis.

2.2.3 Power from below

In November 2022, I was writing an article about digital feudalism and investigated the concept in relation to influencers. I was doing netnography on Instagram and came across the influencer Margaux Dietz's profile. I had read in the newspaper about the mishap that had happened online and how it was causing anger in many. The many comments and reactions to the video caught my eye and I could not help but notice how a cancellation was ongoing. Margaux Dietz being an influencer that has been controversial, criticized and noticed for her actions in the past. This seemed to be the perfect opportunity to gather material about the event to scrutinize how the users of Instagram acted towards Margaux Dietz and how they exercise power through their comments.

On November 3rd, 2022, Margaux Dietz, a prominent Swedish influencer with over 300,000 followers, shared a YouTube video in which an unconscious man was seen lying outside her door (Eriksson, 2022). The footage captured Dietz laughing and allowing her son to poke the seemingly knocked-out and bloodied man. This video received widespread condemnation from the public, leading to numerous companies breaking their collaborations with Dietz and has since then been taken down (Lindgren, 2022; TT, 2022; Winberg, 2022). Subsequently, on December 23, 2022, a documentary titled "Can We Forgive Margaux?" was released by SVT (Swedish Television) that depicted Dietz's perspective on the events that transpired a month earlier - however, this documentary also faced severe criticism from the media (Palo, 2022). Margaux Dietz first gained widespread recognition in 2017 when she posted a video of her child's delivery on YouTube, which received over 2 million views (Axform, 2020; Bouvin, 2022). This propelled her to become one of Sweden's most prominent and recognizable influencers. In 2018, she was named "Influencer of the Year" by ELLE and won the "Video of the Year" award at Guldtuben¹ (Börjesson, 2018). She was also included in the list of Sweden's 30 most influential individuals (Karlsten, 2018). Dietz's popularity continued to soar as she hosted several shows, participated in *Let's Dance*, and started a political series on her YouTube channel where she interviewed Sweden's political leaders (TT, 2018; Rikken, 2019; Anesten, 2018).

To research the power methods performed by the people below, I have observed the comment sections of nine posts published between 25th October and 3 November on Margaux's Instagram channel. The comments on the Instagram-posts were published after Margaux

¹ A Swedish gala for digital influencers

posted the Youtube video and are included in the analysis. Eight of the nine posts were published before Margaux posted her sorry-post, explaining her apology and the event. This post, and the comments on it, has been the focal point for my analysis. Margaux Dietz's Instagram sorry-post was published November 7th 2022 where she has gotten around 22 000 likes and 6 256 comments when the observations were made (07-02-2023). In this study I will refer to this post as the "sorry-post" as this was the first post that Margaux Dietz posted apologizing on her Instagram account after the events that occurred November 3rd 2022. The post initially consisted of three text-filled images wherein Margaux detailed her recent experiences. However, since the commencement of this study (around April), the post has been deleted. Consequently, all that remains are preserved screenshots, transcriptions, and translated materials that have been gathered. This highlights the ephemeral nature of the internet and the challenges associated with studying such a dynamic medium.

Margaux Dietz had chosen to leave the majority of the comments intact without moderation or extensive responses. This is evident from certain comments where tags were visible but the accompanying comments had been removed. Within some threads, there were gaps where users have responded to comments that have subsequently been deleted. It is impossible to ascertain whether these deletions were carried out by Margaux herself or by the respective users. Furthermore, my analysis of the comments has been conducted selectively. While I have reviewed the entire comment section of each post, I have chosen specific quotes that I deemed relevant for categorization, thematization, and scrutiny. In my analysis, I have opted to utilize the actual usernames of Instagram users as they are publicly available and serve to differentiate informants. It is worth noting that users often employ nicknames or pseudonyms, ensuring their identities remain undisclosed. To preserve the anonymity of the online informants, I have refrained from attributing gender in my analysis. Due to the scope of the investigation, it was not feasible to include all comments; however, every aspect of the material has been explored and will serve as contextual background. It is important to acknowledge that the use of users' comments as research material lacks explicit consent from the individuals involved. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that these comments are publicly accessible on the internet making them accessible to study.

2.3 Limitations

The focus of this study is exclusively on the social media platform Instagram, primarily due to practical considerations such as time constraints and the scope of the investigation, but also

because influencers and users themselves have expressed a preference for Instagram as a prominent social media platform (Internetstiftelsen, 2022). The choice of Instagram is reinforced by the fact that Margaux's post was originally shared on this platform. In Sweden, Instagram ranks among the largest platforms, along with Facebook, and is the preferred choice for users in terms of posting content (Internetstiftelsen, 2022). While YouTube may have a larger user base overall, Instagram and Facebook, both part of the Meta network company, are more frequently utilized by Swedish users. According to a survey, 48% of Swedes reported using Instagram on a daily basis (Internetstiftelsen, 2022). Furthermore, Instagram exhibits a broader user base across different generations, with at least 60% of individuals born between 1960 and 2010 indicating their usage of Instagram within the past 12 months (Internetstiftelsen, 2022).

By narrowing the scope to Instagram, there is a risk of overlooking broader trends and patterns in power relations and cancel culture that may exist across multiple platforms or online spaces. The findings may not be directly applicable to other platforms, and the generalizability of the research may be limited. It may lead to a lack of contextual understanding. Power dynamics and cancel culture are influenced by various factors, including societal, cultural, and historical contexts. By disregarding these external influences, the analysis may overlook crucial factors that contribute to the dynamics observed on Instagram. Other platforms and offline spaces may interact and intersect with Instagram, influencing the dynamics within the platform. Neglecting these interconnections could limit the comprehensive understanding of power dynamics in the broader social landscape. Nonetheless, my concentration on Instagram can let me delve deeply into the intricacies of power dynamics and cancel culture within this *particular* platform. This narrow focus allows for a comprehensive understanding of the unique challenges and mechanisms at play on Instagram. Instagram provides a vast amount of publicly available data, including user interactions, comments, and content. This abundance of data offers ample opportunities for analysis, providing a robust foundation for studying power relations and cancel culture. This focused approach enables a more nuanced understanding of the power dynamics peculiar to Instagram, which may differ from other social media platforms. Additionally, future research could consider comparative studies across different platforms to gain a more comprehensive understanding of power relations and cancel culture in the digital realm.

3. Theoretical framework

By utilizing the theoretical framework of feudal power hierarchy and neo-medievalism, this study seeks to examine and illustrate the current relationships and interactions within the domain of social media users. Specifically, I will utilize the concept of digital feudalism and employ metaphors and parables to illustrate the power dynamics in social media and their manifestations. Through the application of medievalism as an analytical prism, the thesis aims to elucidate power practices in the current social media platform Instagram.

3.1 Digital Feudalism as a theoretical model

3.1.1 Feudalism, manorialism and medievalism

During the medieval period in Europe, from the 9th to the 15th centuries, a social system called feudalism emerged, characterized by legal and military traditions (Stephenson, 1967). The feudal system, was a method of managing agricultural societies and rural production (Stephenson, 1967). The power structure, referred to as manorialism, involved a lord controlling a particular area of land (fiefs), which was typically granted to them by a higher-ranking lord or monarch (Bloch, 2005). Peasants resided on this land and were generally politically or economically subordinate to the lord (Stephenson, 1967). The peasants were divided into two categories: freemen, who owned or rented land, and serfs, who were obligated to work the land for the lord without compensation, were considered property, and had few legal rights (Stephenson, 1967). Serfs were required to cultivate tracts of the lord's land and were considered a product of the land (Bloch, 2005). Many manors had grain mills that peasants could use to grind their products, but these mills typically required fees or a share of the produced flour, and thus represented a local monopoly (Bloch, 2005).

The peasants or serfs had very limited power compared to the ruling classes in the feudal society. Nevertheless, they employed various means to assert their influence and peasant revolts were frequent during this period (Bloch, 2005). Public shaming was a prevalent form of punishment and often many forms were employed, including the stocks, pillory, ducking stool, whipping, flogging, and public humiliation (Stephenson, 1967). Mobs, defined as groups of individuals united by a common purpose, held considerable power. However, their actions were often unpredictable and occasionally violent. The mobs could act in different ways to exercise power and used many methods. One of them are riots, which were a prevalent type of mob activity. They targeted specific groups or people and often resulted in

the destruction of property and buildings. Extrajudicial killings or lynchings were also a form of mob action, where individuals suspected of crimes were killed without a trial. The peasants did not always work in groups, sometimes a few self-appointed individuals sought to maintain order. The term "vigilante" originates from the Latin word "vigilare" meaning "to keep watch". Vigilantes were individuals or groups who took it upon themselves to enforce the law, often operating outside of the official legal system (Stephenson, 1967). While some vigilantes were appointed by local authorities to serve as a form of neighborhood watch, others acted independently, occasionally resorting to violence to achieve their objectives.

3.1.2 Digital feudalism

The use of power systems, particularly the medieval period, as an analytical frame is not a novel approach. The term "neo-medievalism" was coined by the Italian sociologist Umberto Eco (1986) to describe a literary movement that employs figures and texts from the medieval era in a contemporary context. He argues that the modern world has developed a fascination with the Middle Ages and that this fascination has led to a revival of medieval imagery and ideas in contemporary culture (Eco, 1986). Eco (1986) sees this trend as a kind of "neo-medievalism" that reflects a desire for a simpler, more stable world in the midst of the complexities and uncertainties of modernity. He notes that this neo-medievalism can be seen in a wide range of cultural phenomena, from the popularity of historical reenactments and fantasy novels to the use of medieval imagery in advertising and political discourse (Eco, 1986). He suggests that this trend reflects a desire for a sense of continuity and tradition in an age of rapid change and innovation (Eco, 1986). He cautions that this neo-medievalism can be problematic, as it can romanticize a period in history that was marked by violence, inequality, and superstition, and argues that it is important to approach the Middle Ages critically and to recognize both its achievements and its flaws, rather than simply idealizing it as a simpler, more authentic time (Eco, 1986). Neo-medievalism provides a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of social and political phenomena in the context of emerging digital media technologies, utilizing medieval terms and concepts to elucidate power dynamics and the enactment of digital pillories (Jensen, 2020). Meinrath (2011) applies the neo-medievalistic framework in his study about the power structure in the digital realm and how many relations imitate feudalism. He describes the contemporary power structures of social media and the associated data science ecosystem bear striking resemblances to the feudal social and economic structure of the past (Meinrath, 2011). His paper argues that the four classes in the pyramid of feudalism, namely the lords or kings of

the manor, major and minor gentry, and serfs or peasants, can be analogized to the companies that own and manage platforms, those with business models based on the platforms, influencers, and users who submit to data collection (Meinrath, 2011). The power structures of modern social media, like those of the feudal system, are based on the unequal distribution of power and wealth. Meinrath (2011) states that users participate in social media platforms, surrendering their data without always being fully aware of it, and in exchange, they access the social media "wonderland."

While Instagram is voluntary, its unique design and popularity make it challenging to abandon, given that it has 1.44 billion users (Datareportal, 2023). Meinrath (2011) highlights the concept of "voluntary participation" in social media platforms is a misnomer, as the internet has become an essential part of modern infrastructure, and its use is often perceived as a necessity. While no one is obligated to participate in a single platform, the question arises as to how much data one is willing to surrender and to how many "lords", if we accept the participation in the digital realm as a necessity for social affinity, participation is the primary state. Like Meinrath (2011), I will assume the participation as inevitable. Meinrath's (2011) study argues that a broad social analysis, rooted in a historical understanding of humans in society, is necessary to understand the implications of technology's impact on social boundaries. Like Meinrath (2011), I will use the concept of digital feudalism as an analytical tool that will be used to study the social challenges facing us in the new information age: the frame or prism, which takes into account the social setting and how human actors can change the technological architecture or social design. Geddes (2020) has based her research on digital feudalism when investigating the systematic exploitation of users that is occurring on digital platforms and calls it techno feudalism. Her article specifically focuses on a particular aspect of content moderation, which is the removal of user-generated content based on copyright enforcement (Geddes 2020). The argument put forth by Geddes (2020) is that the unchecked authority of online platforms to regulate access to user-generated content through anti-piracy algorithms leads to three detrimental consequences. Firstly, it results in the removal of lawful content that is mistakenly flagged as "infringing," leading to the suppression of legitimate speech and a reduction in online discourse diversity (Geddes 2020). Secondly, algorithmic adjudication undermines established exceptions and limitations to copyright protection, disrupting the social contract established by copyright legislation and bypassing fair use jurisprudence developed over decades, while also shifting adjudicatory power from courts to corporations (Geddes 2020). Lastly, the monetization of user-generated

content, not by users but by copyright owners after flagging content as "infringing," is indicative of a broader systemic exploitation of users on digital platforms, often referred to as "techno feudalism" (Geddes 2020). Similar to Geddes (2020), I will look at the power methods exercised from above within the feudal pyramid. The author illuminates the focus on a less existential, but yet significant, threat posed by techno chauvinism - the suppression of free speech, the displacement of the judiciary and the exploitation of digital labor that are brought by the algorithmic assessments (Geddes 2020).

3.1.1 Operationalization

Notably, there are numerous similarities between the feudal system and modern digital society. To operationalize this theory, I have chosen to grasp relevant concepts from the medievalistic theory apparatus. These concepts will serve as a guidance when analyzing the material. Using the three categories of material that illustrate the power interactions within the feudal pyramid, I will define how these fit into the neo-medievalism model as agents - the king, gentry and serfs. Furthermore, I will use medieval descriptions of power exercises to develop the theory. Thus, the pyramid is the static hierarchy where the agents (users, influencers and Instagram) reside, and the actions are the means of power that are performed.

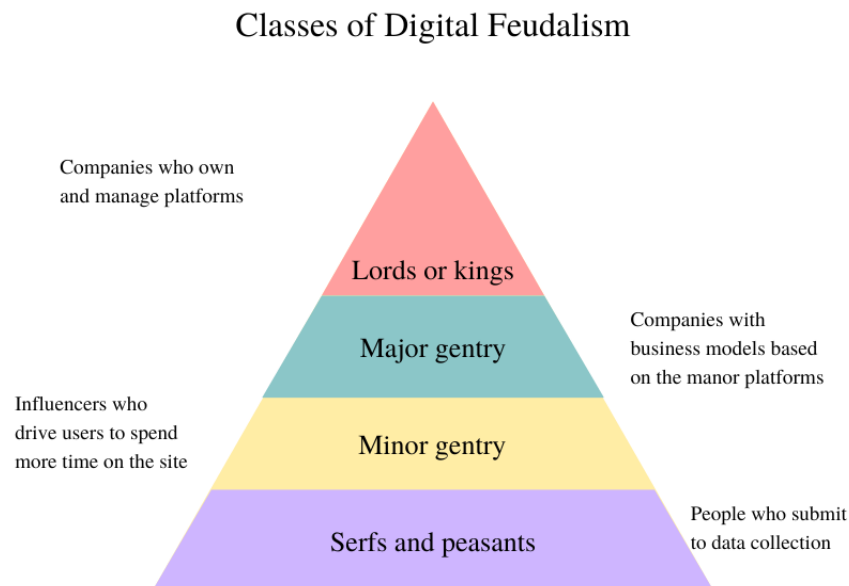


Figure 1: Digital feudal pyramid

In this context I have placed the agents into the feudal pyramid to operationalize the theory to my material. The pyramid comprises four distinct classes: the king, representing the company that manages the platform (Instagram); the major gentry, encompassing business models

based on the platform; the minor gentry, consisting of influencers who operate their business on the platform and drive users to spend more time on the site; And at the base of the pyramid, the serfs and peasants, who are the users and followers who consume the platform and its content in exchange for submitting data for the right to exist in the digital space. In this analogy, influencers and businesses are akin to lords granted digital spaces within the platforms realm, while the platform itself represents the kingdom. The user accounts function as fiefs, with the gentry exercising control over production and its users (serfs). Instead of agricultural output, the users are allowed to grain their oats in the mill if they accept the terms and conditions and thereby surrender their data. Thus, users can be perceived as Instagram's products, comparable to serfs being products of the land, creating a codependent relationship between the platform and its users. The users exist solely because the platform does.

Methods of Power Exercises

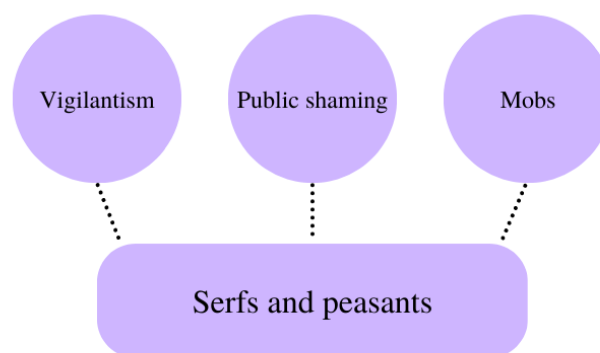


Figure 2: Methods of Power Exercises

Although the serfs and peasant were marginalized in the feudal hierarchy, they exhibited resourcefulness to wield influence. In this study I focus on what power exerted from the upper classes (king), towards the lower classes (gentry and peasants), as well as the methods employed by the peasants to exert power towards the gentry (influencers). To apply the theoretical framework, three medieval concepts are applied to visualize these power dynamics. Public shaming, a method used to publicly humiliate and ridicule rule violators, is applied to Instagram, likening the platform's public space to a town square where individuals are exposed to public scrutiny. Vigilantism, characterized by individuals or small groups acting as moral watchdogs, is compared to users (serfs) who uphold the moral order by identifying and highlighting flaws in the defendants within comment sections. Mobs, representing the collective targeting of individuals or groups deemed to have transgressed,

often leading to extrajudicial violence, are paralleled with the mobilization of Instagram users when singling out and targeting specific individuals. The adaptability of the medieval power model allows for diverse applications. In this study, the theory has been critically examined and tailored to the research material, utilizing medieval concepts as analytical tools to explore power dynamics from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives.

4. State of the art

The study of power dynamics on social media is an extensive and continuously expanding field of research. In the context of investigating power dynamics and interactions among social media users on Instagram, I draw upon selected literature that encompasses three key themes. Firstly, research about techno-feudalism, which in different ways explores the complexities, limitations, and boundaries of power relations between companies and consumers on social media platforms, as well as the potential for consumer participation and criticism. Secondly, the focus is on instrumental interactions with algorithms, providing insight into the intricate architecture and extent of algorithmic power wielded by Instagram. Lastly, attention is given to the processes of online public shaming and the development of cancel culture within the digital realm, examining their moral underpinnings. It is important to note that the literature referenced in this study is not comprehensive within each of these broad areas, but serves as a foundation for the specific field of inquiry addressed by this thesis. The level of detail provided for each source varies based on its relevance to the study's findings. Through cultural analysis and ethnographic methods, this particular case study contributes to the existing body of knowledge, enriching our understanding of power relations and neo-medieval hierarchies within the realm of social media.

4.1 Techno feudalism

Ella Lillqvist et. al (2015) takes a critical discourse studies approach to offer a nuanced understanding of power relations between companies and consumers on social media. Specifically, the article examines the potential for consumer participation and criticism, as well as corporate manipulation of discourse, on corporate Facebook pages (Lillqvist et. al., 2015). Drawing from Bakhtin's concept of dialogue, the study analyzes contextual and discursive features that either facilitate or suppress voices (Lillqvist et. al., 2015). The research reveals how Facebook's features enable a form of "monologization" that gives the illusion of participation while selectively controlling what voices are heard (Lillqvist et. al.,

2015). They write about how the interactive nature of social media has prompted discussions on how corporations utilize these platforms for engaging in a "dialogue" with their consumers (Lillqvist et. al., 2015). It is often claimed that social media is primarily meant for fostering dialogue and participation. As a result, more individuals are now able to express their opinions about companies and their actions publicly Lillqvist et. al. (2015) states.

Shoshana Zuboff's book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (2019) explores the emergence of digital corporations like Google and Amazon and their use of a new form of capitalist accumulation known as surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). Unlike industrial capitalism, which exploit and control nature, surveillance capitalism exploits and controls human nature, with a totalitarian order as its endpoint (Zuboff, 2019). This new form of capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data, which is then used to create prediction products that anticipate users' actions (Zuboff, 2019). These products are traded in a marketplace that Zuboff (2019) calls 'behavioral futures markets.' In a capitalist society, user information, such as likes and dislikes gathered through online platforms, can be used by companies to enhance the user experience and provide personalized content (Zuboff, 2019). However, the danger of surveillance capitalism lies in the fact that tech companies claim ownership of this private information, which they use as "raw material" for data factories (Zuboff, 2019). The lack of government supervision and laws has allowed these companies to go unchecked and led to backlash over how they use this data (Zuboff, 2019). Google, for example, is considered the pioneer of surveillance capitalism and has introduced features that use commercial models. This allows for highly targeted advertising, which can impact decision-making processes and political decisions (Zuboff, 2019). The unchecked power of these tech companies to observe and control thinking is one of the many reasons why they should be under scrutiny and criticism (Zuboff, 2019).

4.2 Invisible power

Through the implementation of particular forms of participation and marketing them as more appealing than others, the proprietors of Instagram are able to establish rules that dominate the platform (Bucher, 2012). Using a framework inspired by Foucault, Bucher (2012) argues that social media algorithms assume relevance and newsworthiness, thereby creating conditions under which users are seen. Instead of promoting participatory subjectivity through constant surveillance, as Foucault suggests, the visibility that algorithms establish

becomes a privilege to be coveted rather than feared. By observing the content and users that receive exposure, Bucher (2012) states that individuals discern the participatory norms that algorithms reward with visibility. Bucher (2012) contends that such behavior change is not enforced through intimidation, but rather motivated by the desire for visibility. Thus, Instagram is able to customize and control the content displayed in users' feeds by dictating the terms on which social media users are exposed, with algorithms serving as disciplinary devices that prescribe participatory norms (Bucher, 2012). The threat of invisibility becomes more formidable when platform owners hide or withhold information about what their algorithms do, how they do it, and why (Bucher, 2012).

Cotter (2019), has studied about seeking visibility as an influencer on social media. The article explores instrumental interactions with algorithms as a window into the complex architecture and extent of the algorithmical power performed by Instagram. Through thematic analysis of discussion among influencers in internet forums, Cotter (2019) has observed how influencers' pursuit of visibility resembles a game created and constructed around the 'rules' of the algorithm. Within the "visibility game" the influencers perceptions of Instagram and its algorithmic architecture act as a lens through which to view and mechanize the rules of the game (Cotter 2019). The article concludes two prominent interpretations; the information influencers obtain about the algorithms, and the preexisting discourses within influencers communities on authenticity and entrepreneurship (Cotter, 2019). Cotter's (2019) study shows that algorithms structure the interdependency between users, algorithms and platform owners, but does not determine the use behavior. The study underlines that digital influencers have made their understanding of algorithms that govern their exposure on social media their business (Cotter, 2019). The implementation of sanctions by Instagram imposes additional regulations that constrain the scope of acceptable growth strategies (Cotter, 2019). For instance, some influencers have reported being "banned" or "shadow banned" by Instagram's algorithms for excessively liking or commenting within a short timeframe (Cotter, 2019). Being banned entails account deactivation, whereas shadowbanning refers to the perceived suppression of one's posts, rendering the user nearly invisible (Cotter, 2019). This means that because of the banning, influencers who have become invisible are denied their means of livelihood and they are unable to live off their occupation. Cotter (2019) investigates this by exploring conscious and instrumental action between social media influencers and the algorithms on Instagram. She observed that influencers' pursuit of influence on Instagram could resemble a game where the rules are embedded in algorithms that regulate visibility

(Cotter 2019). Rather than describing certain endeavors for influencers as ‘gaming the system’, Cotter (2019) suggests that influencers can be reframed as ‘playing the visibility game’ as it shifts the focus from the narrative about a lone manipulator to an assemblage of actors. Within the visibility game, these are the limit to the extent that algorithms control behavior (Cotter 2019). Gillespie (2014) has written about algorithms and their structure, role and relevance in social media. Users frequently participate in online platforms without a complete understanding of the information they provide, which is subsequently utilized to generate value for the platform proprietors (Gillespie, 2014). These algorithms take a multitude of factors into account, such as the user's past behavior and interactions, as well as their social connections and the general popularity of the content (Gillespie, 2014). The algorithms play a significant role in determining the visibility and reach of a user's content, and as such, greatly influence what other users are shown (Gillespie, 2014). Gillespie (2014) means that as we browse the internet, we leave behind data trails that algorithms can manipulate to produce outcomes and make decisions on our behalf. Gedder (2014) concludes that the algorithmical decisions rest on ontological processes of defining and categorizing the data from our online activities - for example recommending certain products depending on the gender, ethnicity, geographical position or social class the algorithmical reads.

4.3 Public humiliation

Most studies about online public shaming are macro-studies. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2022) has studied cancel culture and writes that outrage-, cancel- or call out culture is related to the online forms of public humiliation or shaming that aim to hold individuals and groups accountable for behavior perceived to be offensive to certain groups (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022). Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2022) aims to provide a better understanding of online public shaming as a process imbued in morality. She states that canceling is typically associated with celebrities or personalities, even though it is quickly expanding as an umbrella term, targeting previously private individuals or constitutes the focus of the present analysis (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022). Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2022) aims to investigate why participants in online public shaming retaliate to perceived offensive behavior and what goals they seek by doing so. She does this by studying six recent cases of online public shaming in the USA. Duque (2021) writes that cancel culture is a fluid, shapeshifting, diversity ethos and has its origin in online shaming. The phenomena is driven by the “calling out” or “boycott” movement, initially targeting celebrities who were deemed to have acted or spoken in a questionable or controversial manner (Duque, 2021). The act of canceling

becomes more evident online when the victim of public shaming faces an anonymous mass of others (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022). It is a form of peer surveillance manifested via users posting text, videos or photos online capturing inconsiderate, uncivil, and illegal behavior of other citizens with the purpose of exposing or shaming such behaviors (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022). It is inevitably connected with smart mobs, which is related to the diffusion of mobile phones and their interconnections to the internet which has enabled users to coordinate and organize political action in unprecedented ways (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022). Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2022) calls this digilantism or cyber vigilantism, which involves using digital means for justice. In this cyber age, smart mobs come together for the goal of punishing an individual through online public shaming (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022). To create a smart mob, five components are required; a desire for communication, affordable communication devices, opportunities for instantaneous communication, shared goal and finally, a short time frame (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022). The critical component is having a shared goal and is what distinguishes it from regular network activity, no smart mob is disbanded until its goal is achieved which is to degrade others in the search for social justice (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022). Cyber vigilantes seek to avenge perceived wrongdoings or crime by taking the law in their own hands, because to them, the law is flawed and their mission is to bridge the gap between the law and justice as they believe it fails to fulfill its responsibilities (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022).

The technology used for modern shaming is evolving, making it a revealing lens through which to analyze points of analytical friction within and between the traditional conceptions of privacy (Laidlaw 2017). Laidlaw (2017) has studied online shaming and account for various historical references to describe public shaming in the past such as lynching, the stocks and pillories, floggings and scarlet letters. There is much commonality between modern online shaming and the shaming of offenders in the stocks and pillories in public squares and spaces (Laidlaw, 2017). Laidlaw (2017) explores the different categories of shaming; vigilantism, bullying, bigotry and gossiping. A common feature of shaming is public humiliation - wanting the exposed to be punished by the masses (Laidlaw, 2017). Sometimes the shamed have committed a social transgression and the internet mobs use shame sanctions to enforce the norms in the digital society; condemn offensive or hateful posts, rein in gossip, expose lies, or dig up dirt from the past (Laidlaw, 2017). In some ways, online shaming is what has allowed more open internet - and can enforce rules of civility in online communities (Laidlaw, 2017). In Laidlaw's (2017) article, the regulatory given of

online shaming is used for analyzing what it means for our understanding of the meaning of privacy. Laidlaw (2017) claims that consequences of shame sanctions are reinforced when executed online, because the punishment can be disproportionate to the social transgression, the perpetrators are anonymous and diffuse and the reach of the shame is worldwide and memorialized in the Google search results forever (Laidlaw, 2017). One of the most striking phenomena of social media is civil guards outing individuals that break social and legal rules - vigilantes (Laidlaw 2017). This category includes recruiting the internet mob to track down offenders, and organize the masses and even hunt down individuals who have broken the social rules (Laidlaw). In a typical form of online shaming, the individuals who are shamed have engaged in inappropriate public behavior that the vigilants have deemed worthy of disapproval - in such scenarios, the shamed and defenders tend to sense unfairness about the publicity the situation received (Laidlaw, 2017). Shaming not only serves as a social event, but it can also cause the victim to feel isolated.

4.3.1 Cancel culture

Cancel culture as a phenomenon has gained significant attention in recent years, particularly on social media platforms, where users have the power to amplify their voices and mobilize others to support their cause. Mueller (2021) has explored the subject by using qualitative personal interviews. He has studied who the people that cancel are and what identify them in terms when demanding an apology or call for accountability (Mueller, 2021). The advent of social media has created a space where people can come together as a group and assume the roles of judge, jury, and executioner in regards to the actions of others (Mueller, 2021). The subjects of canceling are often influencers and movie stars, but also corporations that can be canceled through boycotts or products or services (Mueller, 2021). Elissa Nakajima Wickham and Emily Öhman (2022) examines the shift in focus on content policies and users attitudes on the social media platform Reddit. By focusing on comments from general Reddit users from five posts made by admins (moderators) on updates to Reddit Content Policy, the authors show that there is a clear shift in both the contents and the user attitudes that can be linked to contemporary societal upheaval (Öhman & Nakajima, 2022). Hate speech online in comparison with the traditional hate rethorics in the real world has made it necessary to rapidly develop and implement laws regulating offensive hate speech online (Öhman, Nakajima, 2022). Öhman and Nakajima (2022) explains how the characteristics of online communities result that it is much easier for fringe ideal to gain foothold and for users to

spend their online lives in online chambers of hate and target specific groups based on race, sex, gender, sexuality, religion or political beliefs.

Eve Ng (2022) discusses how cancel culture has developed within the digital realm. She states that cancel culture is a relatively new term and refers to the action made by the public when they withdraw any support for those who are assessed to have said or done something that is seen as highly problematic or unacceptable (Ng, 2022). It is done from a social justice perspective, especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and other related issues (Ng, 2022). This leads to them being called out by the public and forced to answer for their mistake. The *#MeToo* movement and how it exposed the scope of sexual harassment and assault, gave cancel culture a dramatic upswing (Ng, 2022). Ng (2022) states that the act becomes dramatically more effective when the canceled person has a social media profile. Ng (2022) argues that cancel culture has been accused of losing a reasonable scale of transgression - meaning that the same treatment meted out someone who made a single problematic post years ago as to someone with an established pattern. Norris (2023) has studied about cancel culture and compared it to the 15th century tale. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne portrays the story of a young and attractive woman, Hester Prynne, who lived in puritan Boston in 1640 (Norris, 2023). As punishment for her adultery, Hester was compelled to wear a scarlet letter "A" as a symbol of her shame. Similarly, in present times, activists use collective expressions of disapproval and outrage in response to speech or actions that are deemed morally inappropriate and offensive (Norris, 2023).

Jamie E. Shenton (2020) describes the divisive nature of social media public culture in which improvised communities of strangers affirm or antagonize one another in non-face-to-face interactions through memes, hashtags, comments and posts. She assumes the work of Michael Herzfeld's notion of cultural intimacy and social poetics to analyze contemporary politicized social media to demonstrate what she calls 'social media poetics' (Shenton, 2020, p. 2). Social media poetics is public online shaming through which antagonists criticize each other and in so doing, create their own identities; a process that builds on essentializing communities of users that quickly become polarized (Shenton, 2020). She states that users 'become' their posts during social media acts of 'creative shame' and thereby making social media a vehicle for perpetuating both community and disunity based on social identities affirmed or antagonized when somehow 'embodied' in their comments or posts (Shenton,

2020, p. 3). He defines social media poetics as the phenomenon in which groups of individuals online utilize reductionist tactics to shame each other, thereby creating their own identities and defining themselves in opposition to others. This type of shaming occurs through various forms of online content, such as memes, hashtags, and posts that possess a visually impactful quality capable of segregating and encapsulating in a contagious and "interpellative" manner (Shenton, 2020, p. 7). Social media poetics occur when symbols and signs are circulated on online platforms, leading to the creation of oppositional communities whose identity is based primarily, if not entirely, on the delegitimization of their opponents (Shenton, 2020). The utilization of labels represents an example of social media poetics, whereby users engage in creative acts of shaming to reinforce positive forms of self-identification (Shenton, 2020). The virtual realm of politics offers many instances of essentialism, whereby individuals are reduced to negative characteristics, such as "deplorability" or "nastiness," both as a means of fostering solidarity and causing discord (Shenton, 2020, p. 5). In these examples, communities of users either embrace embarrassing or disparaging images generated by outsiders, which prompts rueful self-recognition, or carefully curate their social media presence through posts that aim to portray their group in a favorable light, thereby engaging in careful self-presentation (Shenton, 2020). This thesis aims to address a research gap by examining the interplay between power dynamics on social media and online cancel culture. While existing research has predominantly focused on either power dynamics or cancel culture in isolation, this study seeks to contribute to the existing field by exploring the intersection of these phenomena.

By adopting a neo-medievalistic feudal model, this research intends to illuminate the power dynamics at play in online public shaming, both from top-down and bottom-up perspectives. Through this investigation, new insights into power performances within the context of online public shaming will be generated, adding to the existing body of knowledge in this area.

5. Analysis

5.1 Power from above

In this section, I will answer the first question: ‘How is power practiced from above through regulations and changes made by Instagram?’ I will discuss algorithms as an invisible power and how they affect the behavior in influencers. I will also include how Instagrams regulate and govern the behavior of its users. Finally I will argue how it is different acts of power that are being exercised from above upon social media users.

5.1.1 The kingdom

When creating an account on Instagram, all users are asked to sign the terms of use, which involve the community guidelines. If you violate any of the guidelines, Instagram reserves the right to disable your profile for a couple of days, or delete it completely.

Instagram’s Terms and Conditions are called commitments by the platform and revolve around who is allowed to use the platform and restrictions made for the users. The first is the age limit: users are not allowed to be under the age of 13 when creating and using an account. In Sweden, Instagram has an age limit of 13 years old, which is consistent with the age limit set by the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) in the United States. By setting a minimum age requirement, Instagram is able to restrict access to younger users who may be more vulnerable to certain types of content or online behaviors. This control over access allows Instagram to regulate the experiences and interactions of its users, thereby shaping the platform's culture and influencing the behavior of its users. By requiring users to provide personal information such as their birthdate, Instagram is able to collect valuable data about its users, which can be used to target advertisements and inform the platform's business strategies. This is what Zuboff (2019) calls the ‘behavioral futures market’ where one’s behavioral data can be translated and used by companies to enhance the user experience and provide personalized advertisements and content. Instagram's age limit can be seen as a tool for the platform to exercise its power over its users by regulating access, shaping culture, and collecting data. Lillqvist et. al (2015) research reveals how the functions of Facebook enable a form of ‘monologization’ that gives the illusion to the users of participation. Instagram, being owned by Facebook since 2012 (Rusli, 2012), acts in the same way using their superior power to rule its users without their knowledge.

The second rule is that you are not allowed to engage in payments related services with a part that you are denied working with, meaning that you can not have any collaborations with corporations or businesses if you are on an applicable denied party listing. Which means that if a user is on a denied party list, which is a list of individuals or entities that have been sanctioned by the government or are considered a risk for financial transactions, they are prohibited from using Instagram's payments feature or conducting any financial transactions related to their Instagram account with businesses or corporations that are also on the denied party list. This rule is in place to comply with laws and regulations related to financial transactions and to prevent money laundering and other illegal activities. By enforcing this rule, the platform practices power over its users to ensure compliance with laws and regulations and to maintain the integrity of its platform.

Instagram must not have previously disabled your account for violating of law or any of Instagrams policies - if you have been banned, disabled or deleted, you are not allowed to recreate your account to maintain your business or similar. This term of use is implemented to prevent users from repeatedly violating the platform's policies or engaging in illegal activities on the platform. It is aimed at preventing users from creating new accounts to continue their prohibited activities and to maintain a safer and more trustworthy community on the platform. This is a way for the king to decide who is allowed in their kingdom. If you have been banished from the kingdom before, you are banished from Instagram for life with no hope of pardon or trial. By excluding individuals who have violated the law or Instagram's policies in the past, the platform is asserting its authority to determine who can participate in their community. This decision-making power can have significant consequences for individuals who are denied access to the platform, particularly if they rely on it for social or economic purposes. This rule grants Instagram the power to police its own community and determine what behavior is acceptable or not, giving the platform the ability to shape the discourse and practices of its users and a superior power. This guideline is a means for Instagram to exercise control and influence over its users, highlighting the platform's role as a powerful gatekeeper in the online landscape.

You aren't allowed to be a convicted sex offender on Instagram, even if you have served your sentence. This is to protect users from potential harm and to ensure a safe and secure environment on the platform. By prohibiting convicted sex offenders from using Instagram, the platform is practicing its power to maintain its community standards and protect its users. Violation of this rule can lead to immediate account termination and potentially even legal

consequences. This type of control is similar to the medieval feudal system, where the lord had the power to exclude individuals from the community and the benefits that came with it. In the same way, Instagram has the power to exclude individuals from the platform and the social and economic benefits that come with being a part of it. This type of power is based on the control of access to resources and is a key characteristic of feudal power. You are not allowed to impersonate others or provide inaccurate information, meaning that you don't have to disclose your real identity on Instagram but you have to provide up to date and accurate data including personal information. You just can't impersonate someone or something you aren't, create an account for someone else unless you have their permission. This means that you can choose to be completely anonymous as long as you don't portray yourselves as someone else. By requiring users to provide accurate information, Instagram can maintain control over its platform and ensure that users are using it in a way that aligns with its values and mission. This requirement also reinforces the notion that Instagram has the power to dictate how its users should behave on the platform, which is similar to the power dynamic in feudal societies where lords had the authority to dictate the behavior of their subjects. Furthermore, the requirement to provide personal information, such as one's name, can also be seen as a way for Instagram to exert control over users' identities, which is another way in which it resembles a feudal power dynamic.

You can not engage or do anything “unlawful, misleading or fraudulent or for an illegal or unauthorized purpose”, and you can't violate or help/encourage other users to violate the Terms and Conditions, including the Instagram Community Guidelines, Meta Platform Terms and Developer Policies and Music Guidelines. If you post branded content, the post must contain the branded content tool to comply with the Branded Content Policies. This guideline can be seen as an act of feudal power because Instagram, as the platform owner, is setting the rules and determining what behavior is acceptable or not. Instagram has the power to carry out these rules and can take actions such as disabling accounts, removing content, or even reporting users to law enforcement if necessary. In extent, this guideline places users in a subordinate position, as they are expected to comply with Instagram's rules and guidelines to maintain access to the platform. In this sense, Instagram is exercising a form of power and control over its users, like a feudal king. This has significant financial implications for influencers, as their livelihood is intricately tied to the platform, and they rely on their digital space to sustain their professional career and generate income.

Furthermore, users are not allowed to interfere or impair the intended operation of Instagram - this includes misusing any reporting, dispute, or appeals channel, such as making groundless or fraudulent reports to Instagram. The guideline means that Instagram can use its power to determine what constitutes a valid or invalid report, and can potentially use this power to silence or punish users who report content that the platform deems acceptable. It can be seen as an act of feudal power as it reinforces Instagram's control over the platform and allows the platform to maintain its authority over its user base. You are not allowed to create accounts, access or collect information in unauthorized ways, like creating accounts or collecting information in an automated way without Instagram's permission. Users may not sell or purchase any account or data obtained from Instagram. Meaning that you can't sell your username or login credentials, or request or collect Instagram usernames or passwords. Users can't post someone else's private or confidential information without permission or do anything that violates someone's rights, including intellectual property rights. This reinforces Instagram's control over the platform and the information shared on it. By prohibiting users from accessing and collecting information in an unauthorized manner, Instagram can maintain its dominance over the data shared on its platform. It also restricts the ability of users to profit from their data or accounts on the platform, further strengthening Instagram's power. This can be seen as the platform acts as a digital king, again, exerting control over the serfs and their data.

When agreeing to these terms, users also agree to Instagram using the content. Instagram will not claim ownership, however users grant a “non-exclusive, royalty-free, transferable, sub-licensable, worldwide licenses to host, use, distribute, modify, run, copy, publicly perform or display, translate and create derivative works of users content”. The license ends when the content is deleted from Instagram. Users also agree to Instagram using your username, profile picture and information about your relationships and actions with other accounts:

For example, we may show that you liked a sponsored post created by a brand that has paid us to display its ads on Instagram. As with actions on other content and follows of other accounts, actions on sponsored content and follows of sponsored accounts can be seen only by people who have permission to see that content or follow. We will also respect your ad settings. (Instagram's user Terms and Conditions, 2021)

Looking at the Terms and Conditions of Instagram gives an idea of what the application can attract from its followers but wants to limit. To deal with violation of rules and following

suspensions or sanctions Instagram rely on content moderators across the world who review the material (images, videos or textual material) that usually are reported by other users for violating the community rules (Roberts 2018). These content moderators are the watch-keepers of the Instagram kingdom and sit on the power to decide whether a user is allowed to live (remain) or die (banned). It is a task that demands human precision and currently² there is no algorithm or computer that can measure up to what the human workers do. The content moderators are tasked to determine how the material is violating and if it follows the societal norms from the network's policy in a couple of seconds. The moderators are also responsible to make decisions about what material that has to be deleted or what can remain in the feed (Roberts 2018). From the platform's point of view, content moderation is crucial, yet it is outsourced to poorly paid subcontractors (Roberts 2018). The silence around content moderation contributes to giving an image of social media and associated activities as something immaterial and abstract, rather than grounded in the physical world, where one relies on human actors (Roberts 2018). The invisibility of content moderation reinforces the myth that what ends up on Instagram is there thanks to tailor-made tools such as artificial intelligence and computer algorithms, instead of human decision-making and many times pure chance (Roberts 2018). For the users who push the boundaries of what the platform allows for images and videos that are deemed questionable based on mainstream taste, norms, political correctness and security policy, having an image deleted is a frustrating experience. When a photo is removed, the Instagram user behind it has virtually no way, apart from referring to the broadly worded terms of use, to know who reported it and why - and no appeal service. Some Instagram users react to the censorship by posting the same image again, so that others draw attention to the case. Sometimes the result is that the user is banned from the platform, without the possibility to access their account (and not allowed to open a new account, although it is incredibly difficult for Instagram to track this). In some isolated cases, these actions have given rise to policy changes, such as an easing of Instagram's regular banning of images of breastfeeding or menstrual blood. The frustration is that these kinds of rules are not applied or adapted in an equal way, a problem that is easier to understand when you know that to a large extent it is people who are behind the assessments and not robots (Roberts 2018). As for photos depicting the female body (in various stages of nudity), obese people, people of color, or people of ambiguous gender or others who are on the fringes of what is socially acceptable, removal seems to be the price to pay Instagram has

² In 2022 AI-technology has developed in a rapid pace and it might be included in this process in a near future

been used for that kind of personal expression (Roberts 2018). The purpose of Instagram is not a personal gallery and a private sphere for friends, even if it is what Instagram claims to be. Instagram and its parent company, Facebook, are in a gray area where they purposely erase the borders between public and private and leisure and work. The easy and fast access to creating an account is enticing for users to connect and ignore the questions about privacy or losing control over your content. In Geddes' (2020) argument, the unbridled authority of online platforms to regulate access to user-generated content through anti-piracy algorithms can have negative consequences when it comes to Instagram's Terms and Conditions. When a post is flagged as “infringing” it is removed which can lead to the suppression of legitimate speech and limit online discourse diversity (Geddes, 2020).

By studying the material it becomes clear that Instagram practices power through their Terms and Conditions by setting guidelines and rules that users must follow in order to use the platform. These Terms and Conditions give Instagram a significant amount of power over users' accounts and content. If a user violates Instagram's policies, the platform can remove their content or terminate their account, without providing any explanation or recourse. Instagram can use user content for its own promotional purposes, without compensating the user. The Terms and Conditions allow the platform to maintain control over user behavior and content, while limiting users' ability to challenge or dispute any actions taken by Instagram. The set of rules give the platform significant control over user behavior and content, which is similar to the power that feudal lords held over their subjects in the past. Instagram's ability to remove content or terminate accounts without providing any explanation or recourse can be seen as a form of power over users, reminiscent of the power feudal lords held over their serfs. The Terms and Conditions also gives Instagram the right to use, reproduce, modify, and distribute user content for its own promotional purposes, without compensating the user. This can be seen as a form of exploitation, where Instagram is able to profit from user-generated content without providing any compensation or ownership rights to the users. The limitation of users' ability to challenge or dispute any actions taken by the platform, requiring that disputes be resolved through arbitration. This can be seen as a form of power imbalance, where Instagram has more power and control in any legal dispute than the individual user. This illuminates the power dynamics of techno-feudalism, where a centralized platform holds significant power and control over its users, reminiscent of the power feudal lords held over their subjects in the past.

As mentioned above, feudalism was a system of power relations in which the lords, who owned the land, had power over the serfs, who worked the land. Similarly, Instagram, as the owner of the platform, exercises power over its users, who rely on the platform for their social media presence and online engagement. The Terms and Conditions set by Instagram establish a power dynamic where the platform retains significant control over the content posted, and the user abides by the rules and regulations set forth by the platform simply by agreeing to the terms. In this system, Instagram acts like a king and imposes its rules and regulations on the users who depend on the platform for their social media presence.

Instagram's algorithms also act as a form of power, as they determine what content is shown to users and what content is hidden. This can lead to a situation where users are subject to the vagaries of Instagram's algorithm, which can determine the success or failure of their online presence. Additionally, Instagram's ability to monetize its platform by selling user data and advertising space can be seen as a form of feudal exploitation, as the platform profits from the labor and data of its users. Instagram's Terms and Conditions establish a power hierarchy where the platform has significant control over its users. This power dynamic is reminiscent of the medieval feudal power hierarchies, where lords and kings held power over the serfs who depended on them for their livelihood.

5.1.2 The gentry

To answer the first research question about how power is exercised from above I have analyzed 12 interviews made with 12 influencers. These interviews contain stories and reflections about the influencers' experience of working with Instagram as a platform. By analyzing them I have illuminated what power Instagram performs and how influencers are affected by it and what strategies the influencers apply to adapt. The platform holds complete control over the Terms and Conditions that govern the usage of the platform, which can be changed at any time without warning. This means that Instagram can make unilateral decisions about what content is allowed and what is not, and what types of behavior are considered acceptable. Instagram's algorithm is under significant control of the platform, which directly affects how content is selected and promoted. This exercise of power can directly influence the capability of influencers to reach their intended audience and ultimately impact their livelihood. I have categorized the material into two categories - 1, what power is performed towards them, the structural design of the platform, and the invisible power. 2, How do they react to that power through applying tactics or strategies?

5.1.2.1 Invisible power

The platform can limit an influencer's reach and access to users by altering the algorithm that selects and promotes content. This can have a significant impact on an influencer's ability to generate income from their content and ultimately influence their behavior and content creation on the platform. One influencer, Karin, talks about how Instagram recently changed their algorithms. She explains how she doesn't really know what happened but she noticed a change on her platform. She says that "something has happened, and I don't really know what, 'cause they (Instagram) never let us know what they are doing." She has gotten more exposure and gained more followers though she hasn't changed any of her content. Even though Karin thinks it is a good thing that she has more followers than before - the unpredicted changes are making her work unsure as she never knows when the algorithm changes again and stops favoring her.

Interviewer: But do you know that it's the algorithms?

Karin: It has to be.

Interviewer: Or could it be that someone has mentioned you somewhere?

Karin: No, no. Not in that way. I don't think so because it's more than one picture... [...] No, I'm pretty sure that it's the algorithm that has changed.

According to Bucher (2012), social media algorithms operate on the assumption of relevance and newsworthiness, thereby determining the visibility of users. Instead of encouraging participatory subjectivity through constant surveillance, the visibility that algorithms establish becomes a desirable privilege rather than a cause for fear. Karin acknowledges the existence of imperceptible power dynamics such as algorithms that, despite her lack of understanding of their workings, exert an influence on her Instagram channel. Although she has made no changes to her content, she observes that her images have garnered greater exposure and resulted in an increase in her followers. The number of followers serves as an estimate of her reach, which is her primary objective: to attain as many followers as possible. The algorithm on Instagram is controlling the distribution and visibility of Karin's content and determines which posts are shown to users and in what order, which can directly impact Karin's ability to reach her target audience and grow her following. Cotter (2019) suggests that an influencer's profit is primarily determined by the ability to engage in collaborations with external clients and companies, which is often facilitated by having a substantial number of followers, meaning that Karin's ability to reach her followers are substantial. This gives Instagram the power to shape the content that users see, potentially suppressing or promoting certain influencers based on their own interests. The algorithm can change at any time, making it

difficult for Karin to adapt and maintain her visibility on the platform. This can ultimately impact her ability to make a living from their content, giving Instagram significant power and control over the influencer's careers.

Another influencer, Sofia, experienced how Instagram's algorithms disfavored her posts if they had the built-in advertising label. Sofia explains that by using the built-in advertising label you tag the post and the company that is the subject of the collaboration - resulting in a small banner appearing. The post becomes encoded as a paid collaboration, whereas if you just write it in the context text, it becomes clear for the follower but not for the algorithm. Who gains from the existence of the algorithm? The platform itself disfavors influencer collaborations, highlighting its own ads since there is no profit from collaborations between actors independent of Instagram, who only utilize Instagram as their social outlet. In this case the algorithms serve as one of the tools of power that the platform employs to exercise control over the influencers who capitalize on the visual space they obtain for free. Gillespie (2014) writes that algorithms have a significant impact on the visibility and exposure of a user's content, thereby influencing the type of content that other users are presented with on social media platforms. The spreading of her post was determined by Instagram and the algorithm. Sofia says that there are things with the algorithms that she doesn't know or understand, like which posts will be spreaded and which ones will not. "All of a sudden the algorithm likes what I'm doing in a different way than they've done before. Although I do the same thing, it's just that now they've changed something" she says. According to Bucher (2012), the fear of being rendered invisible by social media algorithms becomes even more daunting when the platform's proprietors conceal or withhold crucial details about the algorithms' operations, methods, and purposes. Thus, the unfamiliarity of the algorithm is something that makes it formidable. Sofias unawareness of the algorithm design is resulting in her never knowing when she will be favored or not in the user's feed. Stina expresses the same opinion, that no one understands the algorithm fully but Instagram. "Not even several PR people who sort of research it get it (the algorithm) one hundred percent", she states.

Denice describes how the algorithm is constantly changing, forcing her to adjust her online performance: "I feel a bit like this that the algorithm can never be broken, as it is, because it changes all the time. [...] those who then try to create content to cater to the algorithm, I think it's a, that it's like, it's somehow a fight you can never win." She doesn't want to rely on the

algorithm as it constantly changes and continues to recount for the different focus areas for Instagram:

Instagram has [...] had different metrics on [...] what content they should prioritize. That's where the algorithm has sometimes been... in the beginning it was likes. And then it was like comments and now likes and comments are not very important at all anymore, but then Instagram has prioritized posts that are shared further and posts that are saved. [...] The latest is that they will prioritize reels and DM.

Changes to the algorithm can impact the types of content that are prioritized, making it more challenging for Denice to tailor her content to meet the algorithm's preferences. The constant changes to the algorithm can be seen as a form of control that Instagram has over influencers on the platform. Denice notices and observes the changes and knows that this affects her spreading. She recalls one time when she lost several followers. During a long period of time Denice's number of followers decreased continuously. She had not changed anything in her content and didn't know why this happened.

I had good engagement, I had good, good like comments, there was nothing that stood out like that. And then you start to feel like, in the end, you start to feel that damn it doesn't feel fun anymore. What is it that is wrong? And then it could be, it could be that Instagram runs a series where they remove fake accounts and that you lose a lot of fake accounts, for example.

This shows how Instagram's action directly affected Denice's platform. She adds that the decrease could cause her getting shadow banned, the practice of limiting or suppressing the visibility of a user's content on a platform without their knowledge, and this that stresses her out. Through these events Denice continues to focus on her followers, as she thinks that's the only thing she could do. Another influencer, Vanja, talks about how the algorithmical changes on Instagram results in whole business models to collapse. That's why Vanja mainly uses her blog as a channel to publish content. She doesn't update Instagram as often and describes her social media strategy as a puzzle, where every piece has its own "function and purpose". Influencers who only use Instagram collaborations as an income are vulnerable because of how the algorithms change, Vanja says. She suggests that influencers should develop some other form of service and broaden the business model to secure their earnings.

Susanne doesn't feel the same pressure to figure out the algorithms on Instagram as influencing is not her main source of income. This is significant as the other influencers

stated the importance of working with the algorithm - and also having Instagram as one of their main incomes. Her attitude is a bit more relaxed and she doesn't post pictures as regularly but post stories daily. She recently realized that even though she is posting the stories everyday, they aren't viewed by all her followers: "You get lost in, in the noise and in the algorithms". Although Susanne states that she does not experience the same influence by the algorithm, she still observes the changes and notices differences in her online spreading.

The changes of the algorithm is one thing that stresses Lisa out. She has done a lot of collaborations with companies and wants them to be seen by as many as possible. As influencers are dependent on the exposure of their collaborations to get an income, this is one of the subjects that is being brought up the most. The stress of not achieving visibility through their posts because of Instagram's algorithms. There is a lot of pressure with companies that have paid for exposure and they are not getting it, Lisa says. She says that it is something that she thinks of all the time, consciously or unconsciously: "You feel that you are completely in the hands of Instagram and how they change and fix. Instagram's control over the algorithms on its platform is a means of exerting power over influencers. The power dynamics at play in Instagram's regulation of influencers are similar to those of feudalism, where a lord (in this case, Instagram) controls access to resources and maintains a hierarchy of power over their subjects (in this case, influencers). The platform's control over the means of production (algorithm and access to users) gives it the power to shape the content and behavior of influencers in ways that serve its own interests. In this sense, Instagram is practicing a form of feudal power over influencers on its platform.

5.1.2.2 Structural power

In a parallel to manorialism, Instagram can be likened to a king bestowing land on lords. In this context, influencers are subordinate to the king, as they are assigned digital spaces and accounts within the vast landscape of Instagram. These spaces serve as their digital territories, where they establish their presence and engage with their audience. Using these spaces, influencers are dependent of its function to continue their work - if the platform's structure fails or changes without their knowledge, their livelihood will be put at risk. Karin recounts an incident from approximately a year ago when all of Facebook's channels, including Instagram and WhatsApp, unexpectedly ceased functioning:

There was some theory about how it was because they had been exposed by a whistleblower [...] There was some criticism against Facebook and how it is us (influencers) that spread the news today? Through Instagram and Facebook, so then they had to shut down.

She says that Instagram and Facebook rule all the changes that are happening on the platform and that they have the power to control everything if they want to. According to Karin, their power to control the political conversation and respond to critique makes them a difficult agent to work with as it can shut down anytime. This results in Karin putting more energy on her blog rather than Instagram. Zuboff (2019) argues that social media's way of control over the feed and user's data is surveillance capitalism where the tech companies assert ownership over private information. The absence of government oversight and regulations has enabled these companies to operate unchecked, resulting in concerns about their data usage practices (Zuboff, 2019). This enables highly targeted advertising, influencing decision-making processes, including political choices (Zuboff, 2019).

Sofia describes using Instagram as operating a business in a space where you have no control of what the circumstances are, making you, the business and in extension your income, vulnerable to radical changes. She says that the platform cannot be trusted and recalls when she did a collaboration with a Swedish ID-service who wanted to market how they had Covid-passports in their app. When she posted the collaboration Instagram added a banner to her post that read: "information about covid". This resulted in the post getting very little exposure.

The range just kind of died. [...] I mean it was like, it was such a poor reach compared to my normal posts that it was like a joke. And that felt like super hard work when you said yes, but it is a paid collaboration and they had a lot of expectations and that post just crawled out.

The company she collaborated with had expected more and Sofia couldn't take the post down and put it up again, as it would confuse her followers. Instagram targeted her by tagging the post with the covid label, making it getting little exposure, upsetting the client which Sofia worked for. She says that she was "let down by the technology", this is another example of how dependent the influencers are of Instagrams functionality. Sofia explains how much of her work is reliant on the technology working and that it is frustrating to relate to the platform's changes without knowing them. Instagram exercises power over influencers by maintaining a lack of transparency regarding its platform architecture. By withholding information about how the platform functions and the criteria for content promotion,

Instagram retains the power to shape and manipulate the influencer ecosystem to its advantage, potentially disadvantages influencers who are not privy to the inner workings of the platform. Sofia points out that she knows what she can deliver but that it only works to a certain extent. “If what I publish doesn't reach my followers and they don't even get the chance to go in and read a post or click on a link or take part in something”, she says. She continues by explaining that she has learned much about Instagram during her years as an influencer. She knows what time to publish, how it should look and what to do but when something like this happens she has no control and that is frustrating. She adds: “I'm just borrowing that place from Instagram, I can't control how that algorithm will treat my content.” This is highly equivalent to the workings of the manorialistic power system where gentry were appointed a piece of land or fief to rule over - but still being subordinate to the king.

One influencer, Ida, states that she feels stressed about the fact that Instagram can be shut down or disappear at any time. She has all her images and posts there from several years ago, and hasn't backed anything up. It would be as if her whole life disappeared. Even if Ida has a blog as a backup she values her Instagram platform more and doesn't care that she doesn't own the pictures as long as she can keep them on Instagram. Stina discusses how Instagram is a scary medium where people can be turned off or banned and recalls when she was banned twice last summer.

I hadn't gone on Instagram for several days and then I would go on and it said like this: you can't like and comment now for 72 hours now because you've had a bot-like behavior. I had been liking a lot of stuff (on Instagram) or this commented on the same things, I guess is what they meant. But it was apparently some bug that a lot of people got. But that's what feels so scary that [...] Instagram is a lot of people's primary source of income because it's where they do a lot of collaborations and things like this and that. [...] There is no support you can call (laughter). It's like, there's no office you can visit and just like this: so unblock me, or this is how I can get my, my account back?

Stina got turned off because of her online behavior (commenting and liking several posts in a short period of time). Being a primary source of income for Stina, the lack of control makes her position very vulnerable. She is not just losing all their followers, but also all the content and pictures, having to build up their platform again - something that can take years. Stina believes that influencing is a risky job as there is no support system: “It feels very whimsical,

putting an income in the hands of a social media company that is as scary as the Facebook empire". By maintaining the ability to abruptly shut down, resulting in the disappearance of users' content Instagram is granted control over the visibility and availability of influencers' content, directly impacting their reach, engagement, and overall influence. The platform's capability to remove or suspend accounts can significantly disrupt an influencer's online presence, affecting their relationships with followers, collaborations with brands, and ultimately their ability to monetize their content. The potential for sudden shutdowns creates a sense of vulnerability and dependence on Instagram, as influencers must adhere to the platform's guidelines and policies to maintain their online presence and protect their digital livelihoods.

Denice solely trusts her own performance, hoping that that will work for her platform. She talks about her blog and the reason she has it is because she doesn't own the material that is published on Instagram. If something would happen with the application her pictures and posts would disappear, Denice wants to have that alternative channel where she can continue to have contact with her followers, whatever happens. It is a very unsure work environment as it could perish everything that the influencers have worked for. Compared to an ordinary office, Instagram has very few rights for its influencers. Denice means that, even though the lack of rights, Instagram is the only option. There is no alternative to go on another platform as the users are on Instagram.

It's like an imminent threat all the time. [...] it's really no different from if you had a physical premises that you rented, then it's just that I rent my space on Instagram. [...] you can rent a room on the best shopping street in town, or you can have a free room out in the forest where there is no Wifi and no network and no path to get there. You have to get there by helicopter.

The parable explains why Instagram has monopoly in Sweden being the only alternative. As Instagram is one of the biggest social media platforms in Sweden - there is no possibility for Influencers to go somewhere else. As the dominant platform in the social media landscape, this monopoly allows Instagram to dictate the Terms and Conditions under which influencers operate, including algorithmic changes, content policies, and monetization options. By monopolizing the social media market, Instagram effectively limits the choices available to influencers, making them highly dependent on the platform for audience engagement and brand collaborations. Influencers must conform to Instagram's guidelines and algorithms to maximize their visibility and maintain their follower base. This power dynamic gives

Instagram the ability to shape trends, dictate content trends, and even determine the success or failure of an influencer's career. Instagram's monopoly position reduces competition, limiting alternatives for influencers to diversify their online presence and audience engagement. This lack of competition weakens influencers' bargaining power, allowing Instagram to impose changes or policies that may not align with the influencers' best interests. Instagram's dominance over social media channels empowers the platform to exert control over influencers, shaping their strategies, content, and overall success in the digital space. The monopoly forces users to accept and not question Instagram's authority and all that comes with it (banning, shadow banning, unpredictable changes and algorithmic favoritism).

Like Sofia, Denice also brings up the built-in advertisement label and how there is worse reach on posts with that. She believes that Instagram doesn't want influencers to make money from others when they are on Instagram. "They want us to monetize Instagram by paying Instagram with sponsored as well as post, sponsored, promoted posts. So that's why you don't fill it in." Denice believes that Instagram categorizes its users to tailor the feed and if the profile isn't niched or too broad it doesn't get pushed. Because of the lack of clarity and niched content, Denice doesn't benefit from the categorization.

Similar to a feudal system, where the ruling class holds power over the land and its inhabitants, Instagram holds control over its platform and its users. By altering the platform's algorithms, features, and policies, Instagram determines the success of influencers. This power dynamic can be compared to feudal lords who controlled access to resources and opportunities, granting privileges and benefits to those who aligned with their interests. Instagram's algorithmic changes and platform modifications can significantly impact an influencer's ability to gain followers, receive engagement, and secure collaborations with brands. The constant evolution of Instagram's platform introduces uncertainty and instability for influencers. They must continually adapt their strategies, content, and approach to meet the platform's changing requirements. This creates a power imbalance where influencers are at the mercy of Instagram's decisions, striving to maintain their visibility and influence within the platform's ecosystem. In this sense, Instagram's control over the platform structure resembles the feudal lord's control over the fates of their subjects. Influencers become dependent on Instagram's favor, competing for attention and engagement, and facing potential setbacks when algorithmic changes alter their visibility. While influencers have some agency in navigating the platform, the overarching power and control exerted by Instagram through

its structural changes perpetuates a system where influencers are beholden to the platform's rules and algorithms. This power dynamic reinforces Instagram's feudal-like control over the influencer landscape, shaping their success and determining their fate within the platform's realm.

5.1.2.3 Tactics

To get favored by the algorithm, the influencers apply a range of strategies designed to increase their visibility and reach on the platform. One common strategy is to create high-quality content that resonates with their followers and engages them in conversation. Influencers aim to increase their engagement by interacting with their followers, responding to comments and direct messages, and using Instagram Stories and Reels to showcase their personality and authenticity. By doing so, influencers can build a loyal following and increase their chances of appearing in users' feeds. Another strategy used by some of the influencers to get favored by the algorithm is to collaborate with other influencers and brands. By participating in collaborations and sponsored content, influencers can expand their reach and build credibility among their followers. Influencers employ a variety of strategies to increase their visibility and reach on Instagram, with the ultimate goal of becoming more successful on the platform (Cotter, 2019).

Karin doesn't have the power to affect how successful her platform is and that is making her business very uncertain. She doesn't solely rely on Instagram and use other platforms to secure exposure and by extension an income. She explains that using only Instagram makes you an easy target, if the algorithm would change. Karin recognizes the importance of not relying solely on Instagram and has expanded her presence across multiple social media platforms. By diversifying her platforms, Karin mitigates the risk of being overly dependent on Instagram and can maintain her audience and brand partnerships even if there are algorithm changes or platform issues. Sofia explains that she uses an email list to reach out to her most loyal followers. The list works as a compliment to her Instagram and she refers to it as "her own" where she is in control. She says that being on Instagram is like walking on their premises and playing by their rules.

On Instagram and Facebook [...] it's more about: How should I do something that the algorithm will like, will pick up? How do you do it? Both like what is engaging for my target group, but also match how the algorithm thinks like... Or 'The Algorithm', with a capital A.

Just like Karin, Sofia has figured out a way to keep herself afloat if something would happen to her Instagram-channel. The fear of losing her followers has made Sofia use her email list to maintain visibility and outreach. She likes the email list more as it differs from Instagram where she has to submit to the algorithm. Karin describes a social media phenomena where influencers interact in Facebook-groups to help each other and increase online visibility. “They had a Facebook-group where only an exclusive clique could join, the most famous ones. And there they would write like ‘now I have a collaboration at nine...[...], and then you were supposed to go in and like and comment.” She describes that she had heard rumors about these groups and that it is very hard to come into that community. Karin implies that there is a way to reach exposure if other famous influencers interact with your posts on Instagram, but that it is hard to be invited into these groups: “ You can’t come into their circle, it’s like a school yard. If you get in there, or they accept what you do or if they like it, then you can grow.” She finally adds that she understands why these groups and strategies exist as collaboration posts get fewer likes. Instagram wields power over the behavior and content of influencers on its platform by controlling the means of production, namely the algorithm and access to users. Instagram’s algorithm and the way it selects and promotes content can directly impact an influencer's ability to reach their target audience and can have a significant impact on their ability to make a living from their content. Cotter (2019) writes about pods, a form of private group, allowing influencers to share newly published posts for others to like or comment on. Cotter (2019) notes that pods impose particular guidelines for participation, such as specifying the minimum number of words required in a comment to make it appear authentic to the algorithms.

Pod members coordinate the timing of their post publications to maximize the chances of receiving prompt engagement from fellow members. Maintaining a consistent posting schedule and regularly engaging with each other's content contributes to overall engagement, potentially influencing the algorithm to prioritize their posts. It is important to note that while engagement pods may temporarily boost engagement metrics, Instagram's algorithm is designed to identify and deprioritize inauthentic or manipulative behaviors. If Instagram detects suspicious activity or engagement manipulation, it may lead to negative consequences, such as decreased reach or even account penalties. Therefore, influencers should approach pods with caution, prioritize genuine engagement and audience connection, and focus on creating high-quality content that resonates with their target audience. This

tactic is in other words an effective but risky operation where all participants endanger their livelihood.

Sofia says that she has changed the way she publishes these posts and writes the advertising label in the caption-text instead to reach a completely different type of distribution. “If you wrote the advertising label first in the text instead, it got a completely different type of distribution. [...] It felt like it was an algorithm thing.” Sofia has figured out how the algorithm works and how she has to act to trick it to not get disfavored. Sofia writes the paid collaboration in the caption instead of marking the post as a collaboration. She has tried out both methods and claims that the second makes a huge difference in terms of who sees the post. She adds that this is how the algorithm works now and that it could change, the algorithm might recognize new things in the caption and disfavor those posts too. This seems to be a big problem as most influencers get their income from collaborations, if the collaboration-posts get less exposure, the influencers have to come up with new ways to create and spread the content. Denice has also learned to write the collaboration in the caption instead of using the label to escape the sanctions. “Soon the algorithm will recognize that there is advertising and then you have to write something else”, she says. Meaning that the influencers will have to come up with new strategies to outrun the algorithm when it changes again. Many influencers have struggled with reach of the posts, Denice states. She says that it is exhausting to always relate to the changes and wondering what you can change to grow as an influencer. Sometimes it feels that the algorithm is against her and no matter what she does she loses followers, which has resulted in Denice trying out new techniques to gain followers: “I started testing this by making a lot more reels. And now, in like two months, I have grown with almost a thousand followers. So that's a lot. So that it paid off, it worked”.

Maria changes and develops the content according to what her followers seem to like. Maria has gained a lot of new followers lately and believes that it is because the content she posts and writes is something that people want to share. She states that other influencers blame the algorithm because it is easy, when their struggle for exposure could be related to their lack of creative content. She claims that influencers who believe in the algorithm like to be the victim instead of making their own fortune.

I also learned that some posts get a lot of spread. [...] it's not just a coincidence, but it's about this way I write something that is relevant to many people, then it gets better spread as well. [...] I think that then you simply have to try to perform well (laughs) as well [...]

Marie has learned what the algorithm favors and how to submit to it. She believes that it is what she is writing that is attracting the followers. She says that she thinks that the algorithm's not responsible for her visibility and relies on her creation of creative content - this could be seen as also compelling the algorithm. If she creates the 'right' content for the followers - this is also one way that she conforms to Instagram's algorithmical structure. Stina is also hesitant to the algorithm's power. To tackle the problem of not owning the material or the platform Stina works on, she says that she knows that some influencers urge their followers to like and comment more. She thinks that it is problematic as the followers are not obliged to do so. "I think that everyone's algorithms are like your algorithm and if the algorithm doesn't like something, it's because it doesn't seem to think it's worth liking", Stina says. Meaning that the algorithm may have a clue what the individual follower likes and controls the feed after that clue. She mentions that collaborations don't get that much likes and that it usually is other influencers who have commented on a collaborated post. If collaborations are one of influencers main sources of income - how should influencers not urge their followers to like those posts to make a living? If the algorithm always disfavors advertisements - influencers have no chance to make production on their land.

Denice tries to think about the algorithm in a logical way. She says that the algorithm is an extension of the platform, and if you are to please the algorithm, you have to please Instagram.

What does Instagram want? Instagram wants people to use the app, both the users and us who create the content. So then Instagram wants me to use all the functions that Instagram has. And then I think, if I do that and make content like I do, which is useful for my followers, then Instagram will see that there are many people who interact with this and this is relevant. [...] the algorithm should pick it up as well.

Denice thinks that if she focuses on her followers and what content they want to see, the algorithm should cater her. Again, this problematizes the relation that users have to the algorithm, as they decide what they want to see and share. Just like Maria, who focuses on creating valuable content that will engage her audience, Denice believes that if she concentrates on posting things that would get spread, the algorithm will notice that and benefit her. Denice explains that her followers are her number one priority and that she is not interested in interacting with bigger influencers to boost her account or posting content that

please the algorithm. Many influencers comment on other influencers' posts rather than answer their own followers' comments, she says. Something that Denice's personally not engaged in.

It's a strategy that I don't choose to do because I think that my strength when selling collaborations has been, yes I only have -just over 20,000- followers, but I have damn good engagement. So extremely high, high commitment. And I think that's because I've had this strategy all along, that the followers pay my salary, they're my absolute prio.

The only strategy Denice finds reasonable is to continue doing what she knows as she doesn't know how the algorithm will act. Denice knows that reels are easier to spread but thinks that it doesn't fit into what she likes to post. Denice likes to post pictures and write captions, but is trying to make more reels to reach more followers. A factor that should be included is working with the algorithm, rather than around it. Carolina believes that the time for posting is of essence. "I can post the same type of post at ten in the morning, then it won't have the same impact at all as if I post at eight or half past nine in the evening", she says. The influencer can analyze her statistics and see what posts are reaching out and when they were posted.

Many of the influencers focus on developing a unique and authentic personal brand that resonates with their audience. They establish a distinctive voice, visual style, and content niche that sets them apart from others. By building a loyal and engaged following, they can maintain influence and attract brand collaborations regardless of algorithmic changes. The influencers have learnt to closely monitor changes in Instagram's algorithms, policies, and trends. They stay informed about new features, content formats, and best practices. This enables them to adapt their strategies and content to align with the platform's evolving landscape and maintain visibility. By employing these strategies and tactics, they can navigate the power dynamics imposed by Instagram and maintain their influence, audience engagement, and brand collaborations, even in a platform-controlled environment and sometimes succeed. The influencers express that the followers or the primary users on Instagram are regarded as the currency. The dominant power tool from above is typically characterized as the algorithm, unless when the regulations or the Terms and Conditions are superior. The lords or kings of Instagram are the platform owners who govern their land where minor gentry house manors that are cultivated by peasants exist. The most successful digital gentry may sometimes stand on their sub-platforms, such as blogs or email lists, which

they construct around their core audience. These sub-platforms provide a sense of autonomy when Instagram fails to satisfy the influencer. Companies pay influencers to advertise on their platforms, making them reliant on their followers to be able to reach out with their paid collaborations - but when the algorithms change and they get disfavored, Instagram regains complete control. Influencers rarely serve as actual employees of the media platform, but they receive the major portion of their income from collaborations and advertisements. The influencers modify and apply strategies that conform to the algorithm, thus exerting self-control over the invisible power factor. Without precisely knowing its function or nature, the influencers conform to Instagram's guidelines and followers. Ultimately, Instagram determines the fate of these influencers.

5.2 Power from below

In this section, I will investigate and analyze the comments on Margaux Dietz's Instagram to answer the second question: 'How is power practiced from below and what methods are used by the followers when canceling an influencer?' I will look at how the users use various medieval methods to achieve their goal of canceling, but also what their goal is.

5.2.1 The peasant uprising

To answer the second research question about how power is exercised from beneath I have analyzed the case of Margaux Dietz by looking at her comment section on Instagram. The comments are about Margaux, her actions and the event. By analyzing them I have scrutinized how followers practice power on Instagram when canceling an influencer. Margaux Dietz, is a Swedish popular influencer who was accused of exploiting a man that was passed outside her door and documenting and posting this event on YouTube. In November 2022, the film was posted by herself. In the video, the influencer calls her five-year-old son to "check through the letterbox". She then opens the door and walks out with her son poking the sleeping man. Instead of contacting the police, she called her personal trainer, all this seen on the video. The video has since then been removed from her Youtube channel. Following the publication of the video, Margaux Dietz faced widespread criticism and calls for accountability from her followers. Many users unfollowed her and left negative comments on her posts and boycotted the collaborators that Margaux worked with. She published a post on Instagram containing three images of text where she apologizes for her actions.

Image 1:

The last couple of days I've gotten harsh critique regarding a video I posted last week. I understand the critique, take it to heart and would like to unconditionally apologize. To all fellow human beings, followers and collaborators I have a responsibility. Now, I have failed in that responsibility. What happened is the following. Early in the morning, one of my co-workers that's on her way to me, discovers an intoxicated young man that sleeps outside the door to my apartment. I hear from my colleague in the stairwell that he looks like a family friend and I wrongly presume that that is the case. That's why my son is beside me when I open the door, which he shouldn't have been. As soon as I've checked on him, I call my friend to ask for advice, should I call the police or ambulance? I don't want to call 112 (911) who are already getting bogged down with unnecessary cases. After that we called the police. All of this happens within a few minutes.

Image 2:

I want to make clear that I would have acted differently if the man was in need of emergency care, or unconscious as many media wrongly wrote. Since he was contactable I was able to make the assessment that he wasn't in any danger or posed any danger to us. It was a correct assessment and the police drew the same conclusion directly when they arrived. I understand that the cut movie gives another impression. It pains me that so many believe that I have jeopardized someone's life and health. I then looked up the person in question and apologized as I hoped to not have scared him by calling the police. He apologized to me for falling asleep outside my door and said that he felt fine and that he was now in the right place in the same estate.

Image 3:

The event was filmed and some parts of the event were posted last Thursday on my youtube-channel. The film was instantly removed when I realized my mistake. It was wrong to shoot the event. It was wrong to post it on Youtube. It was wrong to involve my son. And it was wrong to not immediately call the police. There are no mitigating circumstances. Not that I first thought it was a person I knew or that it was other adults nearby. I have lacked responsibility and will from now on examine myself to avoid something like this happening again. I realize that many are disappointed in me. I will leave the comment section open and I understand you who are angry or upset. But I would like you to keep the discussions as free from attacks and hostile critique as possible. Many followers want to proclaim love and encourage the other users to spread love and not hate. They receive instant feedback with followers who excuse their comments and claim that they are just criticism and that an influencer should be prepared to receive criticism when managing such a large platform.
- @margauxdietz

The material consists of the comments on this post, but also eight other posts on her Instagram where users have commented on the event. To analyze the comments I have created three categories which are the following; vigilantism, public shaming, and mobs. This division has been made by looking at different words in the comments, who they are aimed at and what they express. The categories are intertwined and some comments can fit into two or

more categories. I have selected the comments that I interpret as weighted to one way or another.

5.2.1.1 The watch keepers

In the first category, I have looked at the comments that are of a vigilant character - where the users act as self appointed watch keepers and serve the moral justice system by pointing out flaws in Margaux Dietz and also keep order in the comments. Digilantes or cyber vigilantes and medieval vigilantism share some similarities in terms of their methods and goals, they are distinct phenomena shaped by the particular social, technological, and cultural contexts in which they emerge.

One user, matildarborg writes that Margaux “should take an ordinary job and spend a day of her life at the emergency, social services, child care or similar” to become more conscious. Many agree and tune in prompting Margaux to try a day-to-day job to become “less lazy” and “use her head”. This is a moral statement implying that Margaux’s lifestyle is lacking intellectual capacity. To call out problematic behavior by commenting on Margaux’s post, users can publicly show their disapproval for, in their eyes, immoral behavior. Laidlaw (2017) writes how one of the most notable occurrences on social media is the emergence of vigilant individuals who publicly expose those who violate social and legal norms, often referred to as online vigilantes. These cyber vigilantes, or digilantes as Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2022) calls them, practice a form of peer surveillance manifested through their postings of comments. Other users cannot comprehend why or how Margaux published the video and write that it is a sign of Margaux losing contact with her actual existence: “Some have really completely lost touch with reality. What gives you the right to touch and laugh at another human being? And show your kids that it's okay behavior? Sickest I've ever seen! 🤪🙄”, lilly_blanche states. Multiple users wonder what went through Margaux’s head when she decided to film and publish it, not understanding how someone could be so naive and disconnected with the real world. The Instagram users invoke moral principles, such as accountability, fairness, and social responsibility, to justify their actions. They scrutinize Margaux’s behavior, aligning it with societal norms and values, and collectively mobilize to express dissent, raise awareness, and demand consequences. This vigilant behavior is reminiscent of the medieval vigilants that were the civil guards who outed individuals who broke the moral codes and social rules of society.

Katjanouch questions if Margaux Dietz ever thought of helping the man instead of creating content and mock him: “That an adult individual - who is also a mother - behaved like you is completely incomprehensible. Was there any thought of helping instead of "creating content" and mocking an outcast?”. Katjanouch is not alone to bring up Margaux Dietz motherhood into this. This is a part of the cancel culture as people often target individuals based on their roles to shame or criticize them (Laidlaw 2017). By utilizing motherhood as an argument for shaming, cancel culture, participants may invoke societal expectations and stereotypes surrounding maternal responsibilities and behavior (Öhman, Nakajima, 2022). Users argue that a person's actions or choices contradict her role as a mother, portraying her unfit or unworthy of respect or support. This form of shaming seeks to delegitimize the individual's opinions, actions, or choices by associating them with perceived failures or inadequacies as a mother (Öhman, Nakajima, 2022). Employing motherhood as an excuse for shaming demonstrates the intersectionality of cancel culture, where multiple aspects of a person's identity, such as gender, race, or socio-economic background, can be weaponized to discredit and marginalize them. It highlights the need for critical examination of the motives and consequences of cancel culture, promoting a more nuanced and compassionate approach to engaging in public discourse and addressing problematic behavior. Laidlaw (2017) writes how shame sanctions often are aggravated when conducted online, mainly because the persecutors are anonymous, memorialized online and of the possible widespread nature. In Margaux's case, the penalties were of a great magnitude and often contained personal attacks on Margaux's person, as a mother and her personality. It is impossible to say if the online shaming excessive or would have differed offline - but one thing is of meaning: Margaux herself has deleted her post from her Instagram feed - but the images can still be found in the cyber jungle, probably forever.

Many others tune in and argue that Margaux is exploiting the man in the video. The discussion continues to revolve around how Margaux is doing anything for money. They mean that she generates material for her channel to earn money, and that happens at the expense of humans. “When one's own money is more important than other people's lives, it has gone too far a long time ago”, johannaperkhed writes. Another user, fredriko98, thinks that what Margaux did is disrespectful towards the man outside her door, fredriko98 implies that Margaux is like some influencers that would do anything to get views on her channel. Other users tune in and agree with fredriko98. Using immorality and the need for money as excuses for shaming is a facet of cancel culture where individuals are criticized and

condemned based on perceived immoral behavior or financial motivations. This aspect reflects the broader dynamics of cancel culture, where individuals are called out and publicly denounced for their actions or choices. In this context, Margaux Dietz is accused of engaging in immoral behavior or making decisions driven solely by the pursuit of financial gain.

Cancel culture participants argue that these actions are ethically questionable or go against societal norms and values. By invoking these justifications, they seek to shame and discredit the individuals, portraying them as morally bankrupt or driven solely by greed.

Both cancel culture and medieval vigilantism can be driven by a sense of social justice.

Cancel culture aims to hold individuals accountable for their actions, particularly when it comes to issues of discrimination, inequality, or unethical behavior. Medieval vigilantism, similarly, was often motivated by a desire for justice when the established legal systems were perceived to be inadequate or corrupt. Agnezz_z writes that Margaux is unable to respond to the critique and rejects it as hate, agnezz_z believes it is because of how famous she has become:

Sometimes I think influencers become so famous that they can no longer take criticism if they even could before. They seem to believe that all criticism is hate and thus can be dismissed. What you did lacks humanity, the man might as well have had a stroke and you are trying to make some content. - @agnezz_z

Agnezz_z suggests that Margaux is lacking compassion and humanity and that is what made her film and publish the video of the man. According to agnezz_z, Margaux has become blind to what is okay to make content of and the critique that follows. Agnezz_zz means that when Margaux attained celebrity status, she was put on a pedestal and treated as larger-than-life figures. This can lead to their dehumanization, where their humanity is overshadowed by their fame and public image. Consequently, people may perceive them as less deserving of empathy or compassion, as they are seen as untouchable or beyond the realm of ordinary human experiences. Mueller (2021) states that celebrities are frequently objectified, reduced to mere commodities or symbols of entertainment. This objectification can foster a culture of detachment and indifference towards their well-being, as they are viewed as means of amusement rather than as complex individuals with emotions, vulnerabilities, and struggles - making Margaux the perfect victim of cancel culture.

Many users questions Margaux's story about how she thought it was a friend and how she was able to film it if it all happened that fast.

[...] If you really looked at the man, how can you not know if it was a family friend or not? Does it feel strange that your colleague knows who the family friend is and you don't? And if this only happened in a few minutes, how did you manage to film it? [...] In addition, it is incredibly disrespectful to film a vulnerable person in that way. If you were drunk and fell in a stairwell, would you want someone to film you and put it on YouTube? According to the golden rule that says "I shall treat others the way I myself want to be treated", I do not believe that this is a genuine apology, just some awkward damage control. There is so much preparation involved in filming the whole thing, having someone run out the door and film, then someone cuts the film, then uploads it to YouTube. During all these steps, did you ever think "if that was me, I would want someone to put it on youtube", or were you just thinking about getting extra clicks? :(“ - @breakingcraft

Breakingcraft has trouble believing the apology that Margaux has posted and believes it is part of salvaging her brand and reputation. Breakingcraft asks if Margaux did this just to get clicks and asks how she would have thought if she was in the same situation as the man she filmed. Many Instagram users that comment emphasize the importance of verifying sources and cross-checking information to ensure accuracy and credibility. This usually involves fact-checking claims, seeking multiple sources of information, and avoiding spreading rumors or unverified allegations. By promoting a commitment to credibility and responsible information sharing, users can enhance the legitimacy of their claims when canceling an influencer (Laidlaw 2017). One user, call_ejohansson1, refers to the documentary "*Can we forgive Margaux?*" (Kan vi förlåta Margaux?, 2022) and questions how she could make content of the consequences from what she did: “🤔 Thought you were lying low and understood that you made a mistake, but no, of course you recorded a documentary about the whole thing.” The documentary, recorded and made by Swedish Television, receives a lot of backlash in the comment section claiming that Margaux takes advantage of the publicity that her video-publishing has gotten.

Thunbergare reacts to annsoderlund’s comment and writes that it is a good sign that so many people react as there might be “some hope left in the world”. Thunbergare continues by calling out annsoderlund’s claim of misogyny and says that it rather is a sexist act of Margaux because women should know better. “That nice little lady Margaux's film that mockingly clearly shows her higher status and class marker at the expense of someone else's disadvantage? Perverted narcissism...”, she writes. Annsoderlund writes that the act of filming the homeless man isn’t right, regardless of gender, but that she can’t handle the “uncontrolled hate” that Margaux receives. Incorporating gender into the realm of cancel culture as a means for shaming reveals the complexities and power dynamics present within

online social movements. Blacktartan responds to thunbergare's comment and agrees that the reaction is healthy and a mark against the "cold and ruthless climate that thrives".

Ensingelmammasliv demands legal penalties because of the "crime" Margaux has committed. Cyber vigilantes may investigate and uncover instances where an influencer's behavior or actions potentially violate laws or regulations. These violations can range from hate speech, harassment, defamation, or other forms of misconduct. By shedding light on these potential legal infringements, cyber vigilantes seek to garner public attention and pressure authorities to take appropriate legal action (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022). In some cases, digilantes may go beyond individual incidents and advocate for broader legal reforms. They may argue that existing laws are insufficient to address the harmful behavior exhibited by influencers or public figures (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022). Both cancel culture and medieval vigilantism operate outside the formal legal systems. Cancel culture relies on social media platforms and public opinion rather than established legal frameworks to address perceived wrongdoing. Similarly, medieval vigilantism bypassed official legal channels and took justice into the hands of the community or specific groups.

5.2.1.2 The ducking stool

The following category includes users publicly shaming Margaux - it refers to the act of publicly calling out and criticizing her on the internet for her perceived wrongdoings or controversial actions. I have looked at the comments where the users employ public forms of humiliation where Margaux is placed on open digital space to be the object of ridicule. The public forms of humiliation refers to the act of intentionally shaming, embarrassing, or degrading someone in a public setting. It involves exposing their perceived flaws, mistakes, or personal information to a wide audience, often with the intention of causing harm, social punishment, or asserting power over the individual. All of the comments are shaming Margaux and claim that her behavior is wrong and sometimes include prompts that she should be ashamed.

Thekalledude writes that what Margaux did shows a total lack of empathy, moral and fellow humanity and that she deserves to be shamed. When canceling an influencer, public shaming is often enacted through various means on social media platforms. Users may publicly criticize and condemn the influencer's actions, behaviors, or beliefs, often in a highly visible and widespread manner, such as the public comment sections (Mueller 2021). The comment sections are like the town square where the exposed individual can be condemned by the

public, in this way, all users are free to access and ridicule Margaux in the open. Both medieval and contemporary forms of public shaming involve exposing an individual's actions, behaviors, or beliefs to a wider audience. In medieval times, public shaming often took the form of public displays, such as stocks or pillories, where individuals were physically exposed to public scrutiny. In this case, online public shaming occurs on a social media platform where users can publicly call out and criticize Margaux, making her actions visible to a vast online audience. Another user, dutappaengran, criticizes and argues that everything is about compassion:

What she has done had time to go through many eyes, cuts and filters before it was published. It seems to be an operational problem in her company. This should never have been filmed, edited or published. I feel that the criticism she has received from her collaborators is adequate. Any other kind of reaction would have been unreasonable.

Dutappaengran agrees with the media criticism that she has received and that her collaborators ended their cooperation with Margaux. Lkarlzon agrees with dutappaengran and writes that influencing and creating content is Margaux's job, "do you know what will happen if I post a video like that at my job...? Well, I'd be fired immediately". Lkarlzon likens this to his job and claims that Margaux has a responsibility as a public figure to be professional. He suggests that Margaux might try an "ordinary" job to learn what is okay to post and not. Annsoderlund answers lkarlzon and writes that she agrees with him but says that he wouldn't get fired but talk to the HR department. She emphasizes that she doesn't defend the action in itself, but the treatment that unreasonable hate that Margaux gets. Lkarlzon responds and writes that "Margaux's HR department has spoken "She's fired." Many users argue that holding Margaux accountable for her actions is crucial, especially when her behavior involves harm, discrimination, and unethical practices. They believe that canceling Margaux is a way to demand responsibility and send a message that certain behaviors are not acceptable. Since Margaux has a platform and a voice, she should be held to higher standards of behavior. The users argue that if Margaux misuses her influence or promotes harmful ideologies, it is essential to call her out and hold her responsible. In both medieval and online public shaming, individuals who have been subjected to public shaming face widespread condemnation and criticism from a community or society at large. This condemnation aims to hold the influencer accountable for her actions or behavior. In both cases, the act of public shaming involves a collective judgment and punishment by the larger

community. This collective judgment, as can be seen in the material, bypasses formal legal processes and relies on public opinion and perception as the basis for consequences.

Mediadakik writes that she should “[...] just delete yourself from social media. Honestly, I’m ashamed as hell for you. And now you do something so inhumane and disgusting on social media, enough is enough [...]”. This act of public shaming through a comment carries the power to influence public opinion and potentially contribute to the targeted individual facing consequences such as reputational damage, loss of followers, or social exclusion. It relies on the assumption that public shame can be a powerful tool to enforce societal norms and bring about change. Unlike the social world, the internet compels individuals to take action and administer personal justice towards those who violate both offline and online codes of conduct (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022). Online shaming can be compared to the public pillory during medieval times in terms of its potential to expose individuals to public scrutiny, humiliation, and social condemnation. In both cases, the act of shaming is carried out in a public forum, whether it be physical or virtual, with the intention of publicly denouncing and punishing the individual for their perceived wrongdoing. The target of the shaming is subjected to widespread public attention, criticism, and often enduring consequences to their reputation and well-being (Laidlaw, 2017). This parallel highlights the enduring nature of public shaming as a form of social control, although the platforms and mechanisms have evolved with the advent of the internet.

Many users write that she should be embarrassed and ashamed and criticize her for deleting comments instead of responding to them. The most frequently occurring words are inhumane, shame, disrespectful and lacking compassion and empathy. Many of the users are agitated and state that there is no excuse for her behavior, suggesting that there is nothing Margaux can do right in this situation. Some users suggest that she should log out of Instagram and take some time off to get to know herself while others think she should apologize more than she has already done. Individuals who face public shaming may experience stigmatization and isolation from their social circles. They may be shunned, socially ostracized, or even face personal and professional repercussions due to the public backlash (Ng, 2022). There is a sense of individuals who may be in lower positions within a hierarchical structure challenging or exerting influence on those in higher positions. In cancel culture, users or social media participants who initiate or participate in the act of canceling influencers or public figures can be seen as individuals lower in the social hierarchy who challenge or hold accountable those in higher positions, such as celebrities or influential figures. Like peasants

or serfs who lacked political or social power in feudal societies, these users may perceive cancel culture as an opportunity to assert their own influence and impact the lives of those in more privileged positions. Many write that it doesn't matter what she posts now because she has already ruined her personal image by doing this. Kristinmatsson writes:

I don't give a shit about the excuse you gave. A normal person possesses common sense. This is not a "mistake" , it is you as a human being. That is the problem! You write "where, among other things, I am perceived as insensitive" in your apology, that you are not ashamed? 100% that you yourself did not understand that you made one of the biggest mistakes you can make to another person, that you laugh at someone else's misfortune, that says everything about you as a person. Debris! - @kristinmatsson

When someone is canceled, they are often socially ostracized and face significant backlash. This can result in public shaming, loss of reputation, and damage to their personal and professional life. The collective judgment and refusal to accept redemption deny individuals the opportunity to reintegrate into society or redeem themselves. Cancel culture tends to magnify existing power imbalances (Shenton, 2020). Those with a larger platform or following have a greater ability to influence public opinion and contribute to the cancellation of an individual. The power lies in the hands of the collective, and the targeted individual is left with limited agency to change public perception or regain their standing. There is often a focus on punishment and retribution rather than restorative justice. The emphasis is placed on holding individuals accountable without offering a clear path for growth, learning, or redemption. This lack of opportunity for redemption perpetuates a power dynamic where the collective holds the power to define and determine a person's worth and future.

Krisinmatsson disclaims that this was a mistake and states that Margaux is the core to the problem. Other users also claim that this shows Margaux's true colors. Ullisgullis3 also discards the claim that it should be a mistake: "How can so many call this a MISTAKE?? A mistake is when you accidentally back into a lamppost." Ullisgullis3 suggests that Margaux is minimizing her actions by calling it a mistake. A lot of comments encourage her to feel ashamed or ask her why she doesn't feel shame and continues to post on her Instagram. It is interesting here to see how the followers react to Margaux's apology - as she has already explained herself, the collaborations have ended and she is already receiving a lot of hate. But the people want more, they are not pleased with the 'justice' and wish that Margaux's punishment should be of a greater magnitude. With that said, not many followers specify what this punishment should contain (except the users who want legal penalties) and just continue to comment and harass her in the public space.

Some users bring up past events as evidence of her lack of empathy. One user, ministryofdamp refers to her book *Arnold in South Africa* where she excluded people of color and how that was a sign of Margaux's ignorance.

You have lost the right to feel sorry for yourself because people write mean comments. It was probably understood when you came up with your children's book that your world is not the most nuanced, but this goes beyond everything that common sense means. [...] Bufuckinghu. - @ministryofdamp

Users may reference an influencer's past behavior, controversies, or statements to establish a pattern of problematic conduct. By examining the influencer's track record and highlighting consistent problematic behavior, users aim to build a case against them and question their credibility and trustworthiness. The goal of public shaming is to damage the individual's reputation and social standing (Mueller, 2021). Medieval public shaming was aimed to publicly humiliate and ostracize individuals, tarnishing their reputation within the local community. Online public shaming seeks to harm the individual's reputation on a broader scale by sharing negative information, encouraging others to boycott or disassociate from them, and potentially affecting their professional and personal life. Other users also bring up South Africa (where Margaux Dietz has a family vacation home) and claim that she only moves in 'whites only' - areas, or that she supports apartheid. Users may dig into an influencer's past actions or statements to highlight instances of problematic behavior. They share this information with the intention of exposing any harmful or offensive conduct to a wider audience. By referencing past problematic behavior, users aim to demonstrate that the influencer has a history of engaging in harmful actions or expressing offensive views. This pattern strengthens their argument against the influencer and reinforces the need for accountability (Ng, 2022).

Multiple users continue to disclaim her apology and write it is not genuine, or a try to salvage her reputation and keep collaborations and sponsors. Adajohansson thinks that her apology is not legit and just a forced story to try to save her career. _anelina agrees and states that she "hasn't learned a shit", niketyra03 claims that Margaux isn't sorry for what she did but rather that she got caught. Herreujedamajj writes that her story doesn't add up or make sense, accusing Margaux of lying:

[...] You say in the film that the person is covered, bloody, not much, and bruised. But then you write that the person is only sleeping, is unharmed and can be contacted. But when you call 112, you do NOT want to go out and see the person because you are alone with children.

Despite the fact that there is someone filming you and DESPITE the fact that you claim that you already know that the person is just sleeping and doing well. [...] Are you lying to 112 when you say he's bloody and bruised? And why do you lie to them when you say you are alone with a child so you can't check the status? Or are you lying to us when you write that he was ok because he was "only sleeping but contactable".[...] An apology is ok but not when it contains lies to try to erase bits of the event. - @herreujedamajj

The users question the sincerity of Margaux's apology. They argue that she is only apologizing to mitigate the backlash or salvage their reputation, rather than genuinely acknowledging and addressing her wrongdoing. If an influencer has a history of problematic behavior or has issued apologies in the past for similar actions, users may discredit their apologies as empty promises. They argue that the influencer has not shown genuine remorse or made a sincere effort to change their behavior, leading to skepticism about the current apology. Users may discredit apologies if they believe the influencer is deflecting blame, making excuses, or not taking full responsibility for their actions. They expect a genuine apology to include a clear acknowledgment of the harm caused and a commitment to understanding and correcting their behavior. Many argue that an apology alone is insufficient and that tangible steps should be taken to rectify the harm caused or to contribute positively to the affected communities. In cancel culture, public shaming is often fueled by a desire for justice, accountability, and social change (Ng, 2022). Discrediting apologies can be seen as a way for the public to exert their power and demand genuine remorse, meaningful actions, and long-lasting change from those in the public eye. It is a form of collective judgment that seeks to ensure that individuals are held responsible for their actions and are not given a pass simply by issuing an apology.

A lot of users take Margaux's side in this even though they think that what she did was wrong. Mostly, the comments in her defense are about the hate she receives and how that is unnecessary. No.body.fkn.cares writes that people should stop writing hateful comments and that Margaux probably knows that she did wrong. Maximilianmuller9 encourages people to give love instead of hate to make the world a better place. The positive comments are filled with heart-symbols and emojis. Other users come to Margaux's defense and ask the users who criticize her if they haven't done mistakes in their life and write to them to be understanding and forgiving. "I hope all of you who send HATE, that your children don't make any mistakes in some way, what would you do then? Throw hate on social media? 😞. Margauxdietz ❤️❤️❤️", andreassonchristina writes? Themaroad asks how long Margaux should be in cancellation prison - suggesting that they mean that Margaux should be canceled

for a period of time before she can come back. Filipjohqvist asks the users who write negative comments if they have always acted right or never driven by a car accident, “Jumping on her like this and threatening her is just vile and in no way makes you a better person than Margaux, you are just as damn vile as you claim she is.” One user, msvensson89, states that the people who “takes the liberty to write gnarly comments to another human being” are the ones who should be ashamed.

As mentioned, in both cases, shaming involves the public exposure of an individual's actions or behavior. In medieval times, public shaming often took the form of physical punishment or humiliation in front of a gathered crowd. Similarly, online public shaming involves the public exposure of someone's wrongdoing through Instagram, where a large audience can witness and participate in the shaming. Both forms of shaming rely on the collective judgment of the community. In medieval society, public shaming aimed to enforce social norms and maintain order by publicly condemning and stigmatizing individuals who violated those norms. Online public shaming operates in a similar way, as users collectively judge and condemn individuals for their perceived transgressions against societal expectations or moral standards. Public shaming in both contexts can have long-lasting effects due to its amplification and permanence. In medieval times, stories of public shaming could spread through word of mouth and linger in people's memories for a significant period. With online public shaming, the internet's reach and the potential for content to go viral can lead to widespread and enduring consequences for the individual being shamed. Information and accusations can resurface even years later, making it challenging for individuals to escape the consequences of their actions. In both contexts, the accused individuals may face public judgment and consequences without proper opportunities for defense, due process, or a fair trial. Medieval public shaming often lacked formal legal proceedings, and online public shaming can occur without a comprehensive investigation or consideration of all perspectives and evidence. It is important to note that while there are similarities between medieval and online public shaming, there are also significant differences due to the distinct contexts and technologies involved. Understanding these parallels can help foster critical discussions about the ethical implications and potential harms of online shaming and promote more nuanced approaches to accountability, empathy, and online discourse.

5.2.1.2 Mobilizing the masses

In this category, mobilization, users comment to urge other users or collaborators to act. The comments are aimed towards people who are working for or with Margaux Dietz, businesses who have collaborations with her, and her followers. Many of the comments depreciate the collaborators by suggesting to boycott them or contact them to “bring Margaux down”. The term "mob" refers to a large group of people who collectively target a particular individual or group they perceive as having committed wrongdoing, often leading to violent acts such as lynchings. In the context of Instagram, I aim to draw parallels to this concept by examining the mobilization of users when they collectively focus their attention on a specific individual.

One user, [appleandarazorblade](#) writes that other users should write directly to the businesses to alert them to end their cooperation:

LOOK HERE! 🔥 Contact the companies she collaborates with so they choose people with a better view of humanity to collaborate with. [@revolutionrace](#), [@mionetto_se](#), [@stronger](#), [@naturalcycles](#), [@valiosverige](#), [@nakdfashion](#), [@desenio](#), [@jotex.se](#), [@primevideose](#), [@understatement_underwear](#) - [@appleandarazorblade](#)

[Appleandarazorblade](#) has tagged companies who Margaux has collaborations with to notify them on what is happening. [Appleandarazorblade](#) is mobilizing by urging other users to contact the companies Margaux is working with. This peer surveillance and seditious way of communicating is a way for mobs to practice power. The online mobs are often referred to as smart mobs, because of their digital nature. Smart mobs are intricately linked to the proliferation of mobile devices and their integration with the internet, facilitating users' ability to mobilize and orchestrate political activities with unprecedented ease (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022). In order to form a smart mob, five essential elements are necessary: a need for communication, accessible communication devices, instant communication platforms, a common objective, and a limited timeframe (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022). However, the defining factor lies in the shared goal, which sets it apart from regular network engagement. A smart mob remains active until its objective is accomplished, which often involves denigrating others in the pursuit of social justice (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022). When engaging in mobs, users tend to pursue in coordinated efforts to amplify their message and ensure it reaches a wide audience. They may use hashtags, tag relevant individuals or organizations, and share content across multiple platforms to maximize visibility and impact, just like [appleandarazorblad](#). By harnessing the viral nature of social media, users strive to generate widespread attention and public outcry against the

influencer. The users often employ social pressure tactics to encourage others to join the cancellation movement. This can involve encouraging followers to unfollow the influencer, boycott their content, or withdraw support from brands or collaborations associated with them. By exerting collective pressure, users aim to isolate and diminish the influencer's influence, reputation, and financial viability.

Other users comment and write that they hope all the channels that pay her salary will stop immediately. Sessmom states that everyone can do wrong sometimes, but what she has done now is unbelievably tacky and as a parent and adult she should know how to act. Sessmom adds that she agrees with the collaborators that have already decided to end their companionship with Margaux:

It is extremely rare that I actually comment. Yes, everyone makes mistakes. Then you redo and correct. But the thing is, Margaux, what you did was incredibly tasteless. It could come from a youth who has not learned the difference between right and wrong. Here you are; adult, influencer and parent at that. I must also say that I agree that cooperation partners should distance themselves from this. Because it was extremely distasteful and insensitive. I'm unfollowing you now as this feels very unfunny and at the same time to mark my point. In a cold world, the last thing we want to do is spread inhumanity. /Disappointed - @sessmom

Sessmom is apologetic and recognizes that everyone does mistakes but in the same time sessmom takes a stand against what Margaux did, unfollowing her and request companies to distance themselves from her. By writing this in the comments sessmom is also making this statement public - even if it's not an active act of mobilization, it is seditious and raises the tone of the debate. Smart mobs exert power through various means. Their collective actions create a sense of social pressure and conformity, leading to the perception that the influencer's behavior or actions are widely condemned. This can result in reputational damage, loss of followers, and diminished opportunities for the influencer. The coordinated efforts of the mob, fueled by online platforms, enable them to rapidly spread information, amplify their voices, and mobilize support for their cause. By leveraging their numbers and shared goal, they can effectively enforce consequences, demand accountability, and shape public opinion, ultimately influencing the influencer's fate. This power dynamic is further reinforced by the potential for mass public criticism, online backlash, and the potential for long-term reputational harm to the individual being canceled.

Skfkanylen writes that everybody “just has to stop following these kinds of influencers [...] it is the only thing that really affects her” urging people to stop following her in an attempt to

mobilize the masses. The smart mobs share certain similarities with the medieval mob culture in their collective behavior and dynamics. They both involve a group of individuals united by a common purpose or cause, often driven by emotions or outrage. These mobs can exert significant influence and power, fueling the spread of information and shaping public opinion. They both engage in aggressive or punitive actions, targeting individuals or groups deemed responsible for perceived wrongdoings. The emergence of social media has provided a platform for individuals to convene as a collective and take on the roles of judge, jury, and executioner when it comes to assessing the actions of others (Mueller, 2021). Urging people to stop following an influencer can be considered an aspect of cancel culture when it is driven by a collective effort to discredit, boycott, or deplatform the individual due to their perceived problematic behavior or views (Laidlaw, 2017). By encouraging others to withdraw their support or engagement, this action seeks to diminish the influencer's online presence and impact.

Kristofferkitte writes that one should unsubsubscribe and boycott the companies that work with her: “Unsubscribe, unsubscribe! Boycott everything she collaborates with”. This is very urging and mobilizing as kristofferkitte actually tells other users to act, and not declare what he is going to do. Another user, justindispensable, comments that if Margaux is a serious influencers, she should continue to consume the products she has marketed if though they have ended they collaboration. “[...] Really prove that you mean business and keep drinking mionetto EVEN now that they have rightfully terminated the cooperation with you after your disgusting behavior”, justindispensable writes. Many users tag companies that work with her and write that they should dissociate from Margaux and take down any posts on her channel that are containing their products. Another user tags mionetto_se, a company that previously worked with Margaux and urges them to publicly take distance from her. Trollet12345 comments and tells the people who work with and for Margaux to stand up against her and quit:

But listen, you who help manage Dietz's channel, is it not time to stand up, say "no I can't get behind this", resign and maintain some kind of self-respect instead of insisntly deleting and again hoping that the storm will blow over and all will be forgotten in a few days? Or is the money you earn worth more than self-respect? Take a look at yourself while you can, and ask yourself why you really support Dietz.

Trollet12345 suggests that the people that work for her lack self-respect. Similar to medieval mobs, online public shaming can result in a swift and intense response, often accompanied by

harsh criticism, humiliation, and social ostracism. The power dynamics are comparable, as the collective voice of the mob or online community can overpower and silence the targeted individual, often without any formal legal process. Both medieval mobs and smart mobs can lead to real-world consequences for the targeted individuals, such as damage to their reputation, loss of livelihood, and psychological distress. The speed and reach of the internet can amplify the effects of public shaming, as information spreads rapidly and reaches a vast audience.

The frequency of comments is primarily attributed to a select group of users. Around 20-25 users comment more often, either defending or accusing Margaux Dietz. It is evident that some comments have been deleted, as responses to those comments remain. The majority of negative comments employ harsh language, with frequent use of terms such as *inhumane*, *ignorant*, *monstrous*, *privileged*, and *narcissistic*. In contrast, positive comments take a broader perspective, attributing blame to societal factors such as the social media climate, and refraining from directly criticizing Margaux. No one defends the *actions* but they defend her. It appears that opinions are divided on the degree of responsibility that influencers hold in comparison to ordinary users. Some argue that everyone is obligated to show compassion, while others assert that Margaux bears more responsibility due to her business operations and earnings from social media. They contend that her large following and influential status necessitate greater accountability.

The users who have commented on her Instagram channel are agitated about the notion of engaging in actions for the sake of acquiring social media validation at the expense of those who are less fortunate. Many commenters believe that Margaux's apology is a mere effort at "damage control" intended to safeguard her brand. Some suggest that she could undertake additional measures to rehabilitate her image, such as making charitable donations or engaging in community service. The current debate revolves around Margaux. The followers question Margaux's ignorance and lack of empathy in the incident, which they claim was evident throughout the process of recording, editing, and publishing the footage. They also suggest that her apology, posted subsequently, is an obvious attempt at reputation salvage. Some of the followers dispute the apology as disingenuous and a forced story to save her career, while others criticize the timing and motivation behind her apology. However, some supporters of Margaux defend her and assert that she needed time to gather her thoughts and contemplate her actions. A debate about the term "mistake" arises, with some users arguing

that labeling it as such minimizes the gravity of the situation. Furthermore, some users express that the incident highlights the privilege Margaux enjoys and needs to be held accountable for. Despite the disagreement, it is apparent that many followers express disappointment with Margaux's behavior and demand an apology. The debate around Margaux's actions highlights the challenges of social media influencers in maintaining their public image while simultaneously being authentic and empathetic. It also underscores the role of social media platforms in promoting responsible behavior and ethical practices among their users. Power practiced from below on Instagram typically involves followers using their collective influence to hold influencers accountable for their actions, words, and content. Cancel culture, which involves publicly calling out and shaming someone for their perceived misdeeds or problematic behavior, is one of the most common methods used by followers to exert power in this material. Canceling an influencer on Instagram can take several forms, including boycotts, negative comments, unfollowing, and spreading negative information about the influencer. In extreme cases, followers may also launch social media campaigns to pressure brands to sever ties with the influencer, leading to loss of sponsorship deals and income. Cancel culture operates without a discernible scale of transgressions, as demonstrated by numerous instances where individuals are treated similarly regardless of the severity of their actions (Ng, 2022). Meaning that there is no regard to the nature of the crime and the users act independently. The followers use a collective discontent to judge Margaux. Just as Norris (2023) writes, she is marked as immoral for her actions. The users tag her publicly by commenting to show their displeasure.

Thanks to Margaux's public profile - she has been an easier object to hate. Her celebrity is based on social media, which Ng (2022) underlines is effective when performing cancellation. The followers used various tactics to cancel Margaux. They criticize her content - followers point out problematic or insensitive content posted by Margaux, highlighting how it perpetuates harmful stereotypes or promotes harmful behavior. They expose past behavior - the users have shared past statements or actions of Margaux that contradict their current image or public persona, like her child book. Many users use social media campaigns, meaning that some of the users launched social media campaigns with hashtags like #shame and public petitions, calling on Margaux to apologize or take action to address problematic behavior. Group pressure, many users used their collective power to pressure her to change their behavior through direct messages or public comments. It is shown that the users that commented on Margaux's Instagram-post used a range of tactics to exert power over

influencers and hold them accountable for their actions. This example of cancel culture on Instagram can be related to the feudal power system in several ways. It highlights the power dynamics between influencers and their followers, with followers using their collective influence to hold influencers accountable for their actions. This can be seen as a form of neo-medievalism, in which social hierarchies are based on influence and power rather than traditional power structures such as those found in feudal societies. The case of Margaux Dietz illustrates the ways in which cancel culture can be used to enforce social norms and expectations. By calling out and shaming Dietz for her perceived misdeeds, followers were able to exert power over her and shape the narrative surrounding her public persona. Shenton (2020) emphasizes that users become their posts through social media actions. Likewise, Margaux has embodied the Youtube video she posted. She is her online identity and therefore has difficulty distinguishing them in front of her followers. In Margaux's case, it is even more complete as she rarely draws the line between her public and private persona (that we know of), including by documenting her own birth. As followers, we don't know how or where the line is and judge her more easily. This can be seen as a form of social control, where individuals who deviate from accepted norms and values are punished and ostracized by the larger community. This example of cancel culture on Instagram demonstrates how power is practiced from below and how it relates to the feudal power system and neo-medievalism.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary

The objective of this thesis was to explore the dynamics of power within the social media platform Instagram. The study focused on examining the exercise of power from higher authorities through regulations, guidelines, and less visible mechanisms like algorithms. Furthermore, it investigated how power is wielded from lower positions through practices such as public shaming. Through the analysis of three distinct types of data, the thesis showcased the ways in which power operates both upward and downward within Instagram, highlighting the impact on influencers and their subsequent behavioral changes and strategic adaptations. Additionally, the study shed light on the tools employed by users to exert control over influencers.

6.2 Discussion

To reach my aim, I have used the following questions: (1) How is power practiced from above through regulations and changes made by Instagram? (a) What types of power methods does Instagram utilize by demanding that users accept their Terms and Conditions? (b) In what ways are influencers affected by Instagram's regulations and change their behavior trying to operate their business on Instagram's platform? And lastly, (2) How is power practiced from below and what methods are used by the followers when practicing power in the comment sections? Through the usage of the feudal pyramid as a theoretical framework, this thesis has mapped out the existing power relations on the social media application Instagram. Throughout the analysis, I have shown examples of how the digital power structures are reminiscent of the feudal power system. The platform acts as the kingdom where all users must accept, agree and comply with the rules without exception - and without any ability to change them. If the rules do not fit, users are more than welcome to terminate their account and delete their digital persona. With Instagram being one of the dominating platforms in the western world - the question of voluntary participation is adequate. I argue that even if participation is voluntary, the possibility of opting out of Instagram as a social platform is almost impossible. This argument supports the claim that Instagram's regulations resemble the rules that reigned in medieval kingdoms by forcing the users to accept them or be excluded. If a peasant violates Instagram's guidelines the platform can remove the content or even terminate the account, banishing the users from the kingdom forever. This supreme power witnesses an irregular and feudal power structure, where the power is concentrated to very few people. The king demands the executioner to issue the sentence - just like Instagram commands the content moderators to determine the faith of the user.

Instagram affects the influencers and users in different ways. In my material I have illuminated how influencers who use Instagram as their main digital outlet react to the visible and invisible changes and influence the influencers behavior. The material highlights the parallels to manorialism where Instagram can be viewed as a king who grants land to lords. In this analogy, influencers assume the role of subordinate lords who are assigned digital spaces and accounts within the expansive landscape of Instagram. These digital territories serve as their domains where they establish their online presence and interact with their audience. The functionality and stability of these spaces are vital for influencers to sustain their work. However, if the platform's structure falters or undergoes unexpected changes, it poses a significant risk to their livelihood. The study shows that the unawareness of the

changes makes the power performance more potent, as many of the informants state that not knowing how to prepare for the modifications made by the algorithm is causing stress and crestfallen. This aligns with Bucher's (2012) study which confirms the thesis of the fear of the unknown. I mean that it is the ignorance of the algorithm that gives it the power to control the influencer's behavior. It does not go against what Bucher (2012) says about the pursuit of visibility, but I still show that there is a concern about the algorithm. This may be because Bucher (2012) conducted his study before Instagram's algorithmic changes in 2016, and the algorithm's presence is more significant today. I agree with Bucher's (2012) claim that the mystique of the algorithm contributes to it as a means of power. Some influencers who don't use Instagram as their main source of income do not express the same fear of the algorithmic changes as those who do. Instagram's changes to the algorithms reflects power dynamics akin to feudalism, where Instagram assumes the role of a king, exerting control over resources and establishing a hierarchical power structure. With control over the algorithm and access to users, the platform wields influence over influencers, shaping their content and conduct to align with its own interests. This parallels the exercise of feudal power, where Instagram exercises complete control over the influencers within its realm.

To manage the power performed through regulations and algorithms, the influencers have learned to apply various strategies. The informants account for the tactics they use to wield the functions, policies and changes on Instagram and how they try to assess the everyday technical climate. The algorithms employed by Instagram hold a considerable amount of power by dictating the visibility of content to users and concealing certain content.

Consequently, users find themselves at the mercy of Instagram's algorithm, which ultimately decides the fate of their online presence. I claim that the algorithm does influence the behavior of influencers. Cotter (2019) believes that the behavior is not determined by the algorithm, but structures the symbiosis between users, the algorithm and platform owners. I agree with that statement. My study does not show that the behavior is determined by the algorithm but to a large extent changes behavior patterns, forces strategies and tactics.

Furthermore, Instagram's capability to generate revenue through the sale of user data and advertising opportunities can be viewed as a modern manifestation of feudal exploitation, where the platform benefits from the labor and data provided by its users. Gillespie (2014) and Zuboff (2019) both discuss how users give up data in exchange for existing in the digital world - this supports my theory about how the platform exploits its users like lords who demand parts of the production to allow the farmers to work the land and the mill. The main

issue that is visible is that the influencers can not win - even though they sometimes understand or think they understand the algorithm, Instagram always has the upper hand and can change or alter the conditions in which the influencers work with daily. This is what makes the power feudal - focused at the top of the pyramid. The influencers' understanding of the power that is performed is temporal, making the platform a constant sovereign over their digital landscape.

At the bottom of the pyramid, are the peasants who cultivate the land. This study shows that within this hierarchical structure, there exists a dynamic where individuals in lower positions challenge or exert influence over those occupying higher positions. This phenomenon is evident in cancel culture - which is one of the ways power is practiced from below, where users or participants on social media actively engage in the act of canceling influencers or public figures. These individuals, positioned lower in the social hierarchy, seek to challenge or hold accountable those in more elevated positions, such as celebrities or influential figures - in this case it is Margaux who is the object for canceling. Drawing parallels to the power dynamics of feudal societies, where peasants or serfs lacked political or social authority, these users use cancel culture as an opportunity to assert their own influence and affect the lives of those in more privileged positions. In many ways, my research aligns with Meinrath (2011) who states that the internet has adopted a feudal power structure. The material illuminates that Instagram users today can use social media platforms to publicly shame individuals who have violated social norms or offended them in some way. The resemblance with medieval public shaming is the use of social media to amplify and magnify outrage. Just as mobs in medieval times could quickly spread rumors or false accusations through word of mouth, social media platforms like Instagram can rapidly disseminate information and opinions to a wide audience with the help from smart mobs. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2022) writes that the smart mob continues until it has reached its goal. In the case of Margaux, the bullying continued after she apologized, companies ended their collaborations and lost followers - what was the goal of the mob? In my study it seems that time was the deciding factor. After about two months, most people stopped commenting, even though nothing of importance happened at the time. It seems she had been frozen out "long enough". Today, Margaux Dietz has deleted the sorry post and still has over 300 thousand followers. The punishments have ended and she is free - unlike the medieval lynchings that ended in death, Margaux has died digitally only to be resurrected. It is valid to note the differences between medieval power practices and those practiced on Instagram today. Today, users have access to a range of tools

and resources that aren't comparable to those available in the medieval times. Instagram being a global platform that allows individuals to connect with others around the world, rather than being confined to a particular community or geographical area.

Finally, this study concludes that the power practiced on social media resonates with medieval power practices. I have revealed how power is practiced from above through changes of the regulations and the unknown and invisible ever changing algorithm. I have visualized that the kingdom is similar to the digital landscape where the influencers reign over their land where the users cultivate the soil. The influencers are given a small piece of digital space to rule over, this distribution of space is a power practice as the influencers are limited in how to use it - the absolute control lies in the hands of the king. The influencers' possibility to use their land for income is limited due to the restrained options acted out by Instagram. The serfs in this analogy practice power upwards through various methods. This study highlights three methods that are used, cyber vigilantism, mob-culture and public shaming. The vulnerability experienced by influencers is evident when considering their seemingly advantageous position characterized by factors such as income, branding, and follower count. However, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that they possess the least amount of power due to their subjection to the algorithmic mechanisms and the pervasive phenomena of ridicule and cancel culture.

The question emerges about what is static - even though the feudal pyramid is a static power structure, the internet is not and today's social media relations differentiates from the outspoken medieval hierarchy. The assigned role of king, gentry and peasant is not as constant in terms of Instagram, influencer and user. In theory, anyone can be an influencer whereas the major and minor gentry were reserved to ennobled families or patrician bloodlines. In the same way, the king could be exchanged with someone with more liquid funds.

Power Dynamics on Instagram

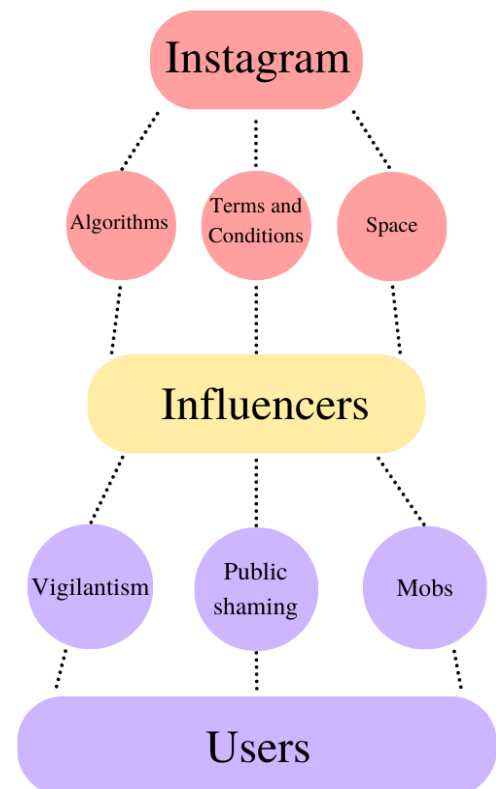


Figure 3: Power Exercises on Instagram

6.3 Applicability.

There is a need to regulate and monitor social media in a different way and it has to be connected to the 'real worlds' jurisdiction and social norms. This research is providing insights into how it affects individuals, communities, and societies. The understanding can help us create policies that protect free speech while also preventing the spread of hate speech and discrimination. Social media platforms have become powerful players in shaping public opinion and discourse. This study can shed light on how these platforms operate and their impact on democracy and society and inform policymakers on how to regulate social media and prevent the spread of misinformation and disinformation. By scrutinizing digital feudalism and power structures online, this thesis can help us understand how this concentration of power affects our lives and what we can do to break up this monopoly. This comprehension can inform policymakers on how to regulate tech companies and ensure that they operate in the best interest of the public. I have contributed valuable perspectives into some of the most pressing issues of our time. By applying this knowledge in a greater context, we can work towards creating a more just, equitable, and democratic online society.

Studying power hierarchies on social media is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, incorporating ethnographic research, such as interviews with key stakeholders like digital activists or information administrators, allows for a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play in instances of online public shaming and cancel culture. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2022) emphasizes the importance of immersing oneself in these online communities to analyze the various resources employed by participants at the microlevel. Secondly, there is a significant gap in research regarding the knowledge building and interpretative processes surrounding algorithms. Algorithms wield substantial power in shaping social realities, yet little attention has been given to comprehending the intricacies and extent of their influence. Cotter (2019) points out the growing concern that algorithms exercise excessive power in shaping societal dynamics, highlighting the necessity of delving deeper into this subject. Furthermore, Meinrath (2011) argues that a comprehensive social analysis, grounded in historical understanding, is crucial for comprehending the implications of technology's impact on social boundaries. By studying power hierarchies on social media, we can gain insights into the broader societal implications brought about by technological advancements. Lastly, it is essential to shed light on the less existential but still significant threats posed by techno chauvinism, as Geddes (2020) suggests. These threats include the suppression of free speech, the erosion of judicial systems, and the exploitation of digital labor through algorithmic

assessments. By examining power dynamics on social media, we can better understand and address these pressing concerns. Instagram, as a social media platform, presents a unique phenomenon wherein its inner workings remain largely elusive to its users. The intricate mechanisms behind its algorithms, their classification, and the associated consequences and possibilities are not fully comprehended by both influencers and ordinary users alike. Consequently, individuals engage with Instagram while lacking a comprehensive understanding of its underlying structure, regulations, punitive measures, and inherent potential. This ambiguity gives rise to speculation and conjecture surrounding the platform's operational dynamics, inadvertently conferring a form of power - the manipulation resulting from a collective state of ignorance concerning its functioning. Studying power hierarchies on social media provides valuable understandings into online public shaming, cancel culture, algorithmic power, technological impacts on society, and the risks associated with techno feudalism. It allows for a more comprehensive knowledge of the complexities and implications of these phenomena, enabling us to develop informed strategies and policies to navigate and mitigate their effects.

References

Material

From Podsedkowska, F. (2023) *Figure 1, 2 and 3*. [designed image].

@margauxdietz (20 January to 15 April 2023) *Nethnographic observations conducted on Margaux Dietz Instagram posts and comment sections*. [Comments and images] [Instagram], Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/margauxdietz/>

Instagram. (26 July 2022) *Instagram's Terms and Conditions*. Available at: https://help.instagram.com/581066165581870/?helpref=uf_share

Instagram. (26 July 2022) *Instagram's Community Guidelines*. Available at: https://help.instagram.com/477434105621119?ref=igtos&helpref=faq_content

Sources

Anesten, O. (4 July 2018) Så vill youtubern Margaux få unga att rösta. *SVT Nyheter*. Stockholm

Axfors, A. (24 September 2020) Influernas mysiga förlossningsfilmer kan vara farliga. *Sydsvenskan*. Malmö

Bouvin, E. (19 September 2022) Margaux Dietz gifte sig – men blev hon gift?. *Dagens Nyheter*. Stockholm

Börjesson, S. (19 January 2018) Margaux Dietz vinner Årets influencer på ELLE-galan. *ELLE*. Stockholm

Datareportal (2022) *Essential instagram stats*. Available at: <https://datareportal.com/essential-instagram-stats>

Demirian, N. (25 November 2020) Efter kritiken mot Margaux – förlaget pudlar. *Aftonbladet*. Stockholm

Eriksson, N. (4 November 2022) Kritikstorm mot Margaux Dietz – filmade utslagen man. *Aftonbladet*. Stockholm

Frid, K. (24 November 2020) Förlaget pudlar om Margaux Dietz kritiserade barnbok. *Göteborgs-Posten*. Göteborg

Haidl, K. (7 October 2020) Margaux Dietz podcast klipps om efter kritik. *Dagens Nyheter*. Stockholm

Internetstiftelsen (2022) *Svenskarna och internet 2022*. Internetstiftelsen. Available at: <https://svenskarnaochinternet.se/app/uploads/2022/10/internetstiftelsen-svenskarna-och-internet-2022.pdf>

Karlsten, E. (27 September 2018) MAKTBAROMETERN 2018: JOCKE & JONNA ÅRETS DIGITALA MAKTHAVARE FÖR ANDRA ÅRET I RAD. *Medieakademin*. Stockholm

Larsson, E. (23 November 2020) Margaux Dietz om kritiken mot barnboken: ”Ber om ursäkt”. *Expressen*. Stockholm

Lindgren, H. (8 November 2022) Företag bryter samarbeten med Margaux Dietz efter kritiserad video. *SVT Nyheter*. Stockholm.

Palo, K. (23 December 2022). ”Kritikstorm mot SVT efter dokumentär om Margaux Dietz”. *Göteborgs-Posten*. Göteborg

Rikken, C. (11 November 2019) Margaux Dietz tar över som programledare för ”Hemliga beundrare”. *Aftonbladet*. Stockholm

Rusli, E. (9 April 2012). “Facebook buys Instagram for \$1 Billion”. *The New York Times*. New York.

Sinclair, S (30 July 2019). Margaux Dietz: ”Ska vara en seriös bransch”. *Svenska Dagbladet*. Stockholm

TT, TT (18 May 2018). ”Margaux Dietz utslagen ur "Let's dance". *Svenska Dagbladet*. Stockholm

TT, TT. (6 November 2022) Företag bryter med Dietz efter kritiserad video. *Svenska Dagbladet*. Stockholm

Winberg, Y. (4 November 2022) Efter kritiken mot Margaux Dietz – nu bryter flera annonsörer samarbetet med influencern. *Resume*. Stockholm

Literature

Bloch, M (2005) *Feudal society. Vol. 2 Social classes and political organisation*. London : Routledge

Bucher T (2012) *Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook*. *New Media & Society* 14(7): 1164–1180.

Collins, S.G. & Durington, M.S. (2015). *Networked anthropology: a primer for ethnographers*. London: Routledge.

Cotter, K (2019), *Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on instagram*. *New media & Society* Vol. 21. p895-913

Gillespie T (2014) *The relevance of algorithms*. In: Gillespie T, Boczkowski PJ, and Foot KA (eds) *Media Technologies*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 167–194.

Hassen, Gabriel J (2011). *Digital Feudalism - An Analysis of Ownership and Control in the Information Age*. 4 Phoenix L. Rev. 1027 (2010-2011) / Phoenix Law Review, Vol. 4, Issue 2 (2011), pp. 1027-1064

Jensen, J. L. (2020) *The Medieval Internet: Power, politics and participation in the digital age*. Emerald Publishing Limited

Kozinets, R.V. (2020). *Netnography: the essential guide to qualitative social media research*. (Third edition). London: SAGE.

Lillqvist Ella , Louhiala-Salminen Leena and Kankaanranta Anne (2016) *Power relations in social media discourse: Dialogization on monologization on corporate Facebook pages*. In Discourse, Context & Media June 2016 12:68-76

McCay-Peet, L and Quan-Haase, A *What is Social Media and What Questions Can Social Media Research Help Us Answer?* In: Fielding, N., Lee, R.M. & Blank, G. (2017). *The SAGE handbook of online research methods*. (Second edition.) London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Meinrath, S.D., Losey, J. & Pickard, V.W. (2011). *Digital Feudalism. Enclosures and Erasures from Digital Rights Management to the Digital Divide*. CommLaw Conspectus: Journal of Communications Law and Policy. (19:2, 423-479). Hämtad från

Roberts, S. T *Att samla in det osedda*. In: Byström, A. & Soda, M. (2018). *Pics or It Didn't Happen : bilder som bannlysts från Instagram*. MiMa Förlag.

Stephenson, C. (1967). *Mediaeval feudalism*. (Reissued). Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press.

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: the fight for the future at the new frontier of power*. London: Profile Books.

Zuckerberg M (2018) *One of our big focus areas*. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10104413015393571> (accessed 28 February 2018).