



# **When Did My Feed Become A Marketplace? Negotiating Commercialisation on Instagram**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the degree of  
Bachelor of Advanced Studies, Honours: Digital Cultures

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**The University of Sydney**

**October, 2025**

## **Abstract**

Since its launch in 2010, Instagram has evolved from a simple photo-sharing application into a multifaceted platform that integrates communication, creativity, commerce, and entertainment. This thesis analyses the evolution of Instagram from a social networking platform to an “all-in-one” hub, and its impact on user engagement and the concept of social connection. Moving beyond the extensively studied marketing and influencer dimensions of Instagram, this research focuses on general users and how they continue to use the platform as a site for social connection amidst its growing commercialisation. Analysing Instagram’s growth from 2010 to 2025, this study traces key feature developments and their cultural implications. Grounded in Pinch and Bijker’s (1987) social construction of technology (SCOT) framework and Hall’s (1973) encoding and decoding model (E/D), it explores the interplay between Instagram’s technological design, user interpretation, and cultural context. The research highlights how algorithmic systems and commercial imperatives have redefined everyday participation and visibility online. Using a qualitative mixed-method design, this study uses in-depth interviews with Light et al.’s (2018) walkthrough method to explore the experiences of long-term users in Australia who joined Instagram before 2015. Through thematic analysis, it examines how users interpret Instagram’s evolving features, negotiate its algorithmic structures, and engage with the platform for both social and personal purposes. This thesis contributes to broader discussions of social media commercialisation by illustrating how digital platforms embed capitalist values into social interaction. By focusing on user experiences, this research shows how technological change and cultural production work together to shape today’s digital world—a space where the drive to connect increasingly intertwines with visibility, exposure, and economic value.

## **Certification of Authorship**

This is to certify that the content of this thesis is my work.

This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or purpose.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all assistance received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged.

During the preparation of this thesis, I certify that I utilised ChatGPT and Grammarly for text enhancement, including grammar, spelling, and paraphrasing. All AI-assisted modifications were carefully reviewed for accuracy, clarity, and potential bias, and were manually cross-checked at all times. I take full responsibility for the submitted work and confirm that it is entirely my own, with generative AI used strictly within the appropriate academic parameters.

*Shalee Wai Mun Boey*

October 2025

## Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by acknowledging the personal journey that has brought me to this point. As someone who once struggled academically, earning grades so low they could not be graded, and who found little joy in reading or writing, completing this thesis has been both humbling and deeply rewarding. I never imagined that I would one day write a paper on a topic I truly enjoy, let alone contribute to the ever-evolving field of digital media.

To my younger self, who faced academic challenges and endless self-doubt: thank you for your perseverance. Your resilience and determination laid the foundation for everything I have achieved today. While this work is nowhere near the scale of a PhD thesis, and though many before me have said it, the past eight months have been far from easy. From finding a topic that genuinely interested me to obtaining ethics approval, conducting interviews, and writing the entire thesis, each stage presented its own challenges. Yet, it has been an incredibly rewarding and educational journey that has allowed me to grow both academically and personally. Today, I am proud to say that I have completed my honours thesis—an accomplishment that once felt beyond reach.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude and thanks to my supervisor, Dr Lik Sam Chan, for his thoughtful guidance, encouragement, and unwavering support throughout this journey. From the very start, he has been patient, kind, and genuinely invested in my work. I am grateful for his time, care, and understanding during every stage of this process. Thank you for being available when I needed help—even beyond regular working hours—and for your prompt and thoughtful responses, even on the weekends. Your mentorship has been invaluable. I truly appreciate your supportive comments and reassurance during moments of uncertainty and your compassion in ensuring I understood every step of the research and writing process.

Secondly, I would like to thank Dr Dennis Bruinings, who taught me in ARIN3620: Researching Digital Cultures in my third year, for recognising my potential and encouraging me to pursue

honours. Your belief in my writing and your suggestion to consider a research pathway planted the very seed that led me here.

My sincere thanks also go to Dr Mark Johnson, whose one kind email acknowledging my work in ARIN3620 inspired me to take this step. Your encouraging words motivated me to believe in my capabilities and gave me the confidence to embark on this thesis journey.

To my family, thank you for supporting me throughout my four years of study and for believing in me even when I did not believe in myself. To my friends, thank you for cheering me on from near and far and for your constant encouragement along the way—you all know who you are. Your kind words and support have meant more to me than I can express.

Finally, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the ten individuals who participated in this research and shared their time, thoughts, and experiences. It was a joy listening to each of your perspectives and seeing your enthusiasm and interests in being part of my study.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In today's hyperconnected world, digital technology is deeply embedded in daily life and has become essential for participation in modern society. Social connection, once primarily grounded in face-to-face interaction, has progressively shifted online through the rise of social networking sites (SNSs) that enable self-expression, communication, and networking (Livingstone & Brake, 2010). This transition began in the late 1990s with SixDegrees (1997)—the first SNS to allow users to create personalised profiles, exchange messages, build relationships, and expand their social networks (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Since then, SNSs such as MySpace (2003); Facebook (2004); YouTube (2005); Twitter—now X (2006); Instagram (2010); Snapchat (2011); TikTok (2017); and BeReal (2019) have emerged, becoming central to the everyday routines of millions worldwide. Today, maintaining an online presence is no longer optional but a social necessity, as digital platforms structure and mediate nearly every aspect of human interaction.

However, as these platforms have developed, so too have their features, functions, and cultural significance. Although still rooted in their original aim of fostering social connection, SNSs have grown into complex ecosystems shaped by monetisation models and shifting user expectations. They now operate at the intersection of social interaction, self-presentation, commerce, and marketing. The rise of user-generated content creators (UGC creators) and influencers, alongside algorithms and in-app advertising, has blurred the lines between casual social engagement and commercial activity. Increasingly, users engage not only to maintain personal relationships but also to cultivate audiences, promote products and services, and curate public personas (Kim & Kim, 2022). This commercialisation has fundamentally redefined how individuals communicate, consume content, and participate online—a shift notably evident in the evolution of **Instagram**.

Originally launched as a simple photo-sharing app, Instagram has evolved into a multifaceted platform that encompasses personal expression, entertainment, commerce, and digital marketing, serving as an “all-in-one” hub that offers a variety of services and experiences (Leaver et al., 2020). The introduction of features such as Stories, Reels, Live, and Shopping has accelerated its commercialisation, with user feeds now blending personal updates, branded content, targeted advertisements, and sponsored posts from UGC creators and influencers. This transformation is

largely driven by Instagram’s algorithm, which curates content based on user preferences and engagement patterns—often amplifying posts aligned with perceived interests over those from accounts a user actively follows (Koç, 2023). While these developments have generated new income streams, career opportunities, and more personalised content, they have also reshaped the original user experience, raising the question: *Are SNSs still about fostering social connections, or have they become platforms centred on performance, visibility, and monetisable engagement?*

### Why Study Instagram?

Among the various SNSs, Instagram is well-suited for study due to its visually driven interface, multifunctionality, and dual appeal for both personal and commercial use. While YouTube and Facebook remain dominant, Instagram’s steady growth—gaining over 70 million new users annually since 2020 (Backlinko Team, 2025)—underscores its expanding influence within the SNS landscape. As the third most widely used app globally (Backlinko Team, 2025), it plays a crucial role in shaping contemporary communication, self-expression, and social connection. Its strategic positioning and distinct user advantages—such as visual storytelling, personalised and algorithmically curated feeds, integrated commercial tools, and interactive features—set it apart from competitors and make it an ideal platform for examining how platform design and evolving features influence user behaviour and participation. Furthermore, Instagram’s trajectory reflects broader digital trends, particularly the growing confluence of entertainment, communication, commerce, and visual media—a direction now emulated by many emerging SNSs.

This thesis uses Instagram as a case study to examine how its evolving features have reshaped online social interaction from its launch in 2010 to the present in 2025. Focusing on users in Australia who joined the platform in 2015 or earlier, it analyses their perceptions of whether Instagram still functions primarily as an SNS or whether its commercial turn has redefined the user experience. Guided by the central research question—*How has Instagram’s evolution into a commercial and content-driven platform reshaped user engagement, particularly in socialising and maintaining personal connections?*—I argue that Instagram’s growing focus on profit-driven goals, such as maximising visibility, engagement, and advertising revenue, has altered the way users interact with one another. As commercialised content increasingly permeates the platform, the boundaries between organic social posts and curated commercial content (e.g., sponsored ads

by UGC creators, influencers, and algorithmically suggested content) have blurred. This shift, in turn, has diminished much of the authenticity and enjoyment that once represented Instagram's social networking experience.

### What is a Social Networking Site (SNS)?

Such changes also call for a re-examination of what constitutes an SNS. Boyd and Ellison (2007) define SNSs as web-based services or online spaces that allow individuals to connect, interact, build relationships, and share information with others. These platforms enable users to create public or semi-public personal profiles, share various forms of content (e.g., text, photos, and videos), and form networks through mechanisms like followers and following relationships. Notably, this definition does not address monetisation or commercial activity. Yet, Instagram's evolution has been marked by the growing centrality of both, marking a substantial deviation from its origins as a purely social platform. It no longer aligns neatly with the traditional concept of an SNS; rather, it has become a hybrid environment where commercial interests increasingly shape and dominate social interactions.

While existing studies have explored Instagram's feature evolution over the past decade (Love, 2015; Bharti, 2021; Raj et al., 2021; Hogsnes et al., 2024; Bleier et al., 2024), much of this research has focused on its emergence as a digital marketing powerhouse and a site of income generation. Scholars often highlight how ordinary users can readily transition into UGC creators by producing and sharing content for revenue, as well as how brands and businesses leverage Instagram to build visibility (Naem & Okafor, 2019; Tafesse & Dayan, 2023; Rieder et al., 2023; Bleier et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2025; Pal Singh et al., 2025). However, this commercial lens has left other aspects of user engagement underexplored—particularly the experiences of long-term general users who have been active since Instagram's early, pre-commercial phase and how they have adapted to its continual changes.

Existing discussions of Instagram's development also remain brief and fragmented, offering little sustained analysis of its broader trajectory. The only scholarly resource that directly addresses feature evolution, *Instagram Revisited* by Laestadius and Witt (2022), examines a limited range of changes—focusing on the platform's earliest functions, features released during COVID-19,

and one development up to 2016—without providing a comprehensive overview of subsequent rollouts. Similarly, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* by Leaver et al. (2020) includes a timeline of features up to 2019 but appears only in the appendix and lacks substantive discussion of how the platform has evolved. While non-academic sources offer more detailed timelines (Klemons, 2020; Ward, 2025), they too overlook user perspectives and fail to consider how users respond and adapt to these ongoing changes. Therefore, the absence of longitudinal, user-focused research leaves a critical gap in understanding how Instagram’s evolving features have shaped patterns of social engagement and user adaptation over time.

This thesis addresses that gap by shifting attention to Instagram’s social dimension and providing a detailed analysis of its feature expansion from inception to the present. Specifically, I examine how Instagram’s developing features have influenced users’ capacity for social engagement, with a focus on those who continue to utilise the platform for personal connection and community building. By foregrounding user experience beyond commercial imperatives, this study provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of how individuals navigate and negotiate Instagram’s increasingly platformised nature—where social, commercial, and algorithmic logics converge to redefine online social interaction.

In summary, this thesis begins with a literature review that situates Instagram within its historical and theoretical contexts. It traces the platform’s evolution from 2010 to 2025, highlighting key feature developments and its current role in content creation and the platform economy. This chapter also introduces the theoretical frameworks guiding the study—Pinch and Bijker’s (1987) social construction of technology (SCOT) and Stuart Hall’s (1973) encoding and decoding (E/D) model—which together frame how users contribute to, engage with, and adapt to these changes. The methodology chapter outlines the research design, employing in-depth interviews alongside Light et al.’s (2018) walkthrough method. It details the rationale for these methods, describes the thematic analysis process, and discusses the strengths and limitations of each. The findings chapter then follows, revealing that despite widespread frustration with advertising, aesthetic pressures, and algorithmic control, users continue to rely on Instagram as their primary means of maintaining social connections. This persistence highlights the platform’s deep integration into contemporary social life, indicating that while commercialisation has reshaped user engagement,

Instagram remains a central site for digital social interaction. Finally, the conclusion chapter summarises these outcomes and offers recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Instagram, co-founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, is an American SNS designed for sharing photos and short-form videos. Launched on October 6, 2010, it attracted 25,000 users on its first day and has since grown to over 2 billion monthly active users, ranking as the third most popular platform worldwide (Ita, 2025). Users can upload media and engage with others' content by liking, commenting, sharing, reposting, sending direct messages (DMs), following, tagging, and more. It has become an immensely popular way to connect with friends and family, follow public figures, and discover content from a vast range of creators (Love, 2015; Meta, 2025a).

As its popularity surged, Instagram drew substantial interest from investors and tech companies eager to capitalise on its success. In April 2012—just 18 months after its launch—Instagram was acquired by Facebook (now Meta Platforms, Inc.) for \$1 billion (Yang, 2021). The acquisition was driven not only by Instagram's global success as a visually oriented platform but also by Facebook's strategic goals: expanding into mobile photo sharing, engaging with younger users, and “neutralising a rising competitor” (Bell, 2024). Recognising Instagram's potential for mobile advertising revenue, Facebook viewed the platform as a valuable asset to solidify its dominance within the social media market. Since then, Instagram has benefited greatly from Facebook's resources and infrastructure, which has accelerated feature development and fostered a strong advertising ecosystem (Rodriguez, 2019; Bell, 2024). These investments transformed Instagram from a startup with no initial market value to a company now estimated to be worth \$538 billion (Intuition Media Group, 2025). However, the acquisition also marked a significant turning point, as Instagram's core identity shifted from a simple SNS to a platform increasingly focused on commercialisation and continuous technological innovation.

Commercialisation refers to the process of managing a product, service, or platform with the primary aim of generating profit or revenue. It involves converting an offering into a marketable commodity designed for large-scale distribution and consumption (Cambridge, 2025). Within the media landscape, however, the term takes on a more nuanced meaning: the reconfiguration of media content and platforms—like Instagram—into profit-generating commodities. This process

extends beyond the introduction of advertisements and is shaped by broader structural factors, including ownership (who controls the platform), market competition (the presence of competitor platforms), financial models (how revenue is generated), and organisational strategies (how the platform is structured and operated) (Wright et al., 2017; Ganjeh et al., 2019; Piepponen et al., 2022).

On Instagram, commercialisation extends beyond content monetisation to a deeper restructuring of the platform’s architecture and functionality around revenue generation (Piepponen et al., 2022; Ferdinands, 2022). This is evident in the algorithmic prioritisation of sponsored posts and paid promotions, the integration of branded content tools for businesses, and the introduction of premium features—such as ad-free feeds—for users willing to pay for an upgraded experience. For instance, a monthly subscription of AUD \$10.60 to remove ads (Meta, 2025b) illustrates how even the platform’s most basic functions have been commodified. As Instagram explicitly states, “If you don’t want to subscribe, you can choose to continue using our products free of charge with ads” (Meta, 2025b), reinforcing that ads are now inescapable for non-paying users. Whereas Instagram’s early years offered a seamless, ad-free browsing experience, commercialisation has since made advertising ubiquitous, gradually dominating feeds and reshaping user interaction. The subscription model now charges users for what was once free: a cleaner and more private interface. In doing so, Instagram has commodified the feed itself—both what users see and how they see it. This transformation underscores how user attention and platform control have been converted into marketable products. Attention has become a “scarce and valuable resource”—the new currency of the digital economy—deeply embedding commercialisation within Instagram’s infrastructure (Kubler, 2023, p. 967). What began as an organic space for social connection has thus been reconfigured into a mechanism of revenue extraction, where everyday participation is harnessed as economic value.

### The Evolution of Instagram’s Features

Although this definition conceptualises commercialisation, Instagram’s growth exemplifies how these dynamics unfolded in practice. As shown in Change 5 in Table 1, the platform’s first signs of commercial intent appeared in 2013 with the introduction of Instagram Ads, marking its initial move toward commercialisation (Klemons, 2020). This trend continued in 2014 with the rollout

of basic business analytics tools (Change 7 in Table 1), including sponsored posts and expanded reach options. While limited in scope, these features enabled businesses to experiment with targeted advertising and broaden their visibility. However, early adoption remained low due to their experimental nature and geographic restriction to the U.S. market (Perez, 2014). It was not until 2016 that Instagram firmly established its commercial identity with the launch of Instagram Insights (Change 14 in Table 1)—a suite of business features that introduced business profiles, in-app analytics, and advanced promotional tools available worldwide (Perez, 2016; Klemons, 2020; Meta, 2025c).

**Table 1.** Instagram’s Features from 2010 to 2025

(Perez, 2014; Perez, 2016; Klemons, 2020; Preview Team, 2024; McLemore, 2024; Khalid, 2024; Shtanakova, 2025; Ward, 2025; Meta, 2025c; Pokrop, 2025; Thornhill, 2025)

Change:	Year:	Feature:	Usage/Purpose for Users:
<i><b>The Launch of Instagram on 6th October, 2010</b></i>			
1.	<b>2010</b>	Photo-sharing, Likes, Comments, Square Images, Simple Filters, and Chronological Timeline	Share personal moments visually, interact with other users via likes/comments, apply basic filters, and view posts in order of posting
2.	<b>2011</b>	Hashtags (#)	Discover new content and connect with like-minded users through specific tags, similar to Twitter (e.g., #Foodie #TravelLife #Selfie #OOTD)
<i><b>Facebook bought Instagram for \$1 billion in 2012</b></i>			
3.	<b>2013</b>	Direct Messaging (DM)	Privately share posts, photos, videos, and messages with specific individuals or groups
4.		Photo Tagging, “Photos of You”	Tag people in posts and easily view all tagged photos on one’s profile listing
5.		Introduction of Instagram Ads	Introduced sponsored posts and video posts, helping businesses reach a wider audience

6.	<b>2014</b>	New Editing Tools	Allow users to customise their images before posting (i.e., brightness, contrast, shadow, tone, and highlights)
7.		Business Analytics Tools (US Only)	Brands gain insights into post-performance, user demographics, and engagement metrics
8.	<b>2015</b>	Panoramic Photos	Post wide-format images without forced cropping into a square format
9.		Boomerang	Create fun, looped videos that play forward and backward repeatedly
<b><i>Instagram hit 400 million active users in 2015</i></b>			
10.	<b>2016</b>	Stories (24-hour posts)	Share temporary, casual content that is separated from the main feed with other users (inspired by Snapchat)
11.		Manage Multiple Accounts	Easily switch and manage multiple Instagram profiles (e.g., personal and professional) from one app
12.		Non-Chronological Timeline	View content prioritised by relevance (Instagram’s algorithm) based on user interests instead of posting time
13.		New App Icon and Design	Updated visual identity for a more modern and minimalistic app experience
14.		Instagram Insights (Business Analytics Tools, Worldwide)	Offer brands and creators newer and advanced business tools (i.e., audience demographics, post reach and impressions, call-to-action (CTA) buttons, like “Shop Now” and “Learn More”)
15.	<b>2017</b>	Likes on Comments	Engage deeper by liking specific comments on posts to promote conversations and connections with other users
16.		Live Broadcasts	Share real-time experiences and interact instantly with audiences through live chat
17.		Carousel Posts	Share up to 10 images or videos in one post in a swipeable format
18.	<b>2018</b>	Story Highlights	Save, organise, and customise important Stories on users’ profiles

19.		Instagram Insights (Improved Version)	Track the performance of posts and Stories for a better content strategy
20.		Links in Stories	Drive traffic to external websites, shops, or blogs directly from Stories
21.		Saved Folders	Store and revisit favourite content/posts privately anytime
22.		Send Stories to Others	Share someone else's Stories directly to friends via DMs
23.		Polls in Stories	Interact with other users by asking them questions, boosting interactive engagement
24.		IGTV (Long-form videos)	Upload and watch longer videos (up to 60 minutes), similar to YouTube
25.		Close Friends Option	Share more private Stories with a selected list of followers only
26.		Voice and Video Calls	Allow users to voice and video call other users through the DM feature
<b><i>Instagram hits 1 billion active users in 2018</i></b>			
27.	<b>2019</b>	Stickers for Orders and Donations	Introduced during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Support small businesses and nonprofits directly through Stories
28.	<b>2020</b>	Instagram 'Reels'	Create and consume short, vertical videos up to 60 seconds, similar to TikTok
29.		Instagram Shopping	Discover, browse, and purchase products directly within Instagram like a virtual store
30.	<b>2021</b>	New Fonts in Stories	Customise text creatively with new fonts when posting Stories
31.		Live Videos with More than 2 People	Host live chats, interviews, or panels with up to 4 participants
<b><i>Instagram hits 2 billion active users in 2021</i></b>			
32.	<b>2022</b>	Favourites and Following Tabs	Customise feed experience to prioritise posts from favourite accounts or only followed users

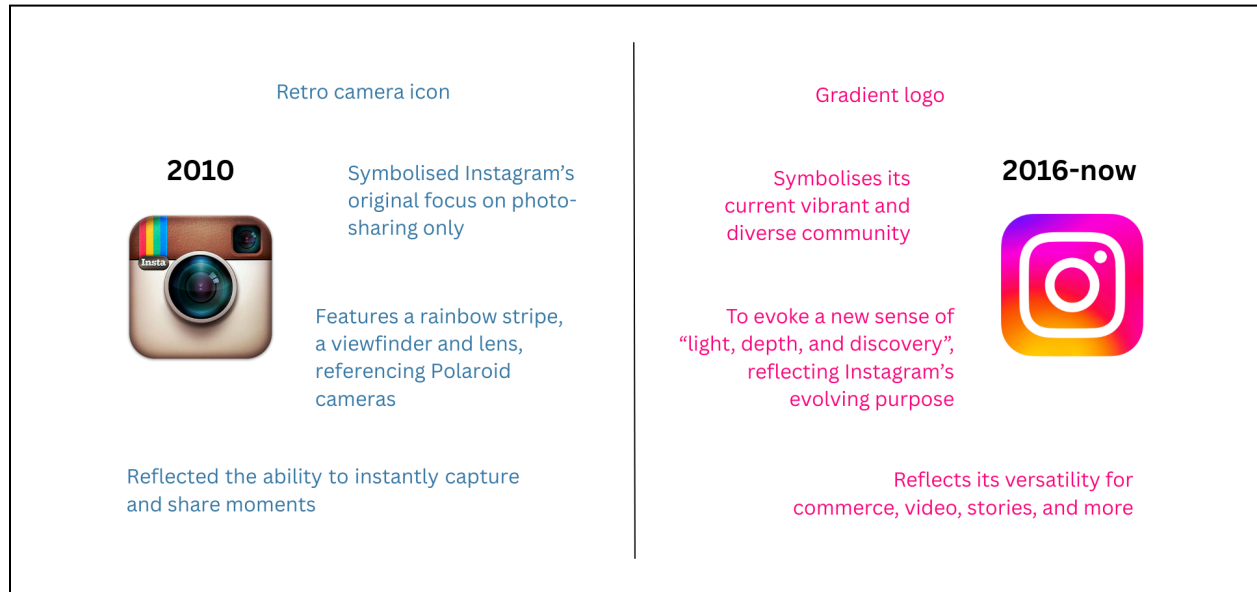
33.		90-second Reels	Create longer Reels up to 90 seconds for more detailed storytelling or creative content
34.		Story Likes	Allow users to react to other users' Stories, boosting social interaction
35.		DM Themes	Customisable background colours/designs in DM
36.	<b>2023</b>	Instagram 'Gifts'	Allow fans to support their favourite creators through small monetary gifts
37.		Broadcast Channels	One-way communication tool for creators to send messages, polls, or images to followers
38.		Meta Verified (Paid)	Obtain a verification badge via subscription for increased credibility and support features (previously available only to celebrities)
39.		Instagram's New App 'Threads'	Share text updates and engage in public conversations with other users, similar to X (also known as Twitter)
40.	<b>2024</b>	Public Collections	Save and share curated collections of saved posts with other users (collaborative curation)
41.		Text Notes and Video Notes	Allow users to share short text or video "status updates" that appear above their DMs page and remain visible for 24 hours (e.g., "feeling relaxed today")
42.		Add Music to Profile	Features a song on your personal profile page (30 seconds of the song to play)
43.		AI Profile Pictures, AI Search Bars, and AI Chats by Meta AI	Enhance personalisation and discovery using Meta's AI-powered tools
44.		Edit Direct Messages (DMs)	Enable users to edit a sent message within 15 minutes by holding on to it and selecting "Edit" from the dropdown menu
45.	<b>2025</b>	Rectangular Content for Profile Grids	Allow full-size, rectangular photos/videos to appear naturally in profiles without cropping to squares (suited for content creators)

46.		Instagram’s New App ‘Edits’ (Video Editing App)	Create advanced video edits (i.e., filters, auto subtitles, background removal) directly in Instagram without external apps (inspired by CapCut)
47.		Story Comments	Allow users to comment on other users’ Stories, boosting social interaction
48.		20 Slide Carousel Posts	Share up to 20 frames (i.e., photos, videos, or both) per post in a swipeable format
49.		Instagram ‘Map’	Enable users to share their live location with friends, view others’ locations, and explore posts and stories tagged by place
50.		Instagram ‘Shots’	Send unedited, unfiltered images that can be viewed once by the recipient before disappearing, similar to BeReal
51.		Instagram ‘Friends’	Introduced a ‘Friends’ tab to the Reels feed, allowing users to view public content their friends have interacted with, such as likes, comments, reposts, and shares
52.		Instagram ‘Reposts’	Allow users to repost public Reels and feed posts, making it easier to share content with friends
53.		Instagram Insights (Latest Version)	Advanced analytics for Reels and Carousel posts, including post-level demographics, viewer engagement metrics, and key drivers of follower growth

### Identity Rebranding

A major rebranding soon accompanied these structural shifts in 2016, when Instagram unveiled a new logo and app design (Change 13 in Table 1). The transition from a retro Polaroid camera icon to a minimalist, gradient logo (Figure 1) represented more than a visual update—it symbolised Instagram’s evolution from a nostalgic photo-sharing app into a sleek, commercially driven ecosystem. This rebranding reflected its change under Meta into a versatile, multi-purpose platform, with the new visual identity signalling an expanded direction beyond photography to encompass diverse forms of content and expression (Knorr, 2017). As Instagram explained, “the gradient is a guiding light towards exploration and discovery—igniting curiosity on the app” (Meta, 2025d), reinforcing its repositioning as a space that blends personal expression, creativity,

and commerce. In this sense, the 2016 redesign crystallised Instagram’s shift into a commercial, algorithmically driven space, laying the groundwork for its development into an “all-in-one” hub for self-presentation, content creation, commerce, and social interaction.



**Figure 1.** Evolution of Instagram’s Logo: 2010 to Present (2016-Now) (Bicaku, 2023)

### Instagram is an “All-In-One” Hub

This transformation stands in sharp contrast to Instagram’s early years, when its functionality was simple, minimal and non-commercial. In 2010, the platform primarily enabled users to share personal photos, apply 1 of 13 basic filters (e.g., Moon, Lark, Rise), view posts chronologically, and engage through likes and comments (Change 1 in Table 1) (Love, 2015). It operated solely as an SNS, without algorithms, business tools, or marketing features. However, as new platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok, and BeReal emerged, Instagram adapted to maintain its competitive edge, market position, and user base (Isaac, 2016; Silva, 2024). It began introducing a series of new features, many directly inspired by its rivals: in 2016, Instagram launched Stories (Change 10 in Table 1), replicating Snapchat’s 24-hour temporary content format (Constine, 2016; Ward, 2025); in 2020, it released Reels (Change 28 in Table 1), adopting TikTok’s short-form video model to capitalise on the growing vogue of short, engaging content (Silva, 2024; Ward, 2025); and most recently, in 2025, it introduced Instagram Shots (Change 50 in Table 1), allowing users

to send unedited images that disappear after a single view—echoing a feature popularised by BeReal (Hutchinson, 2025).

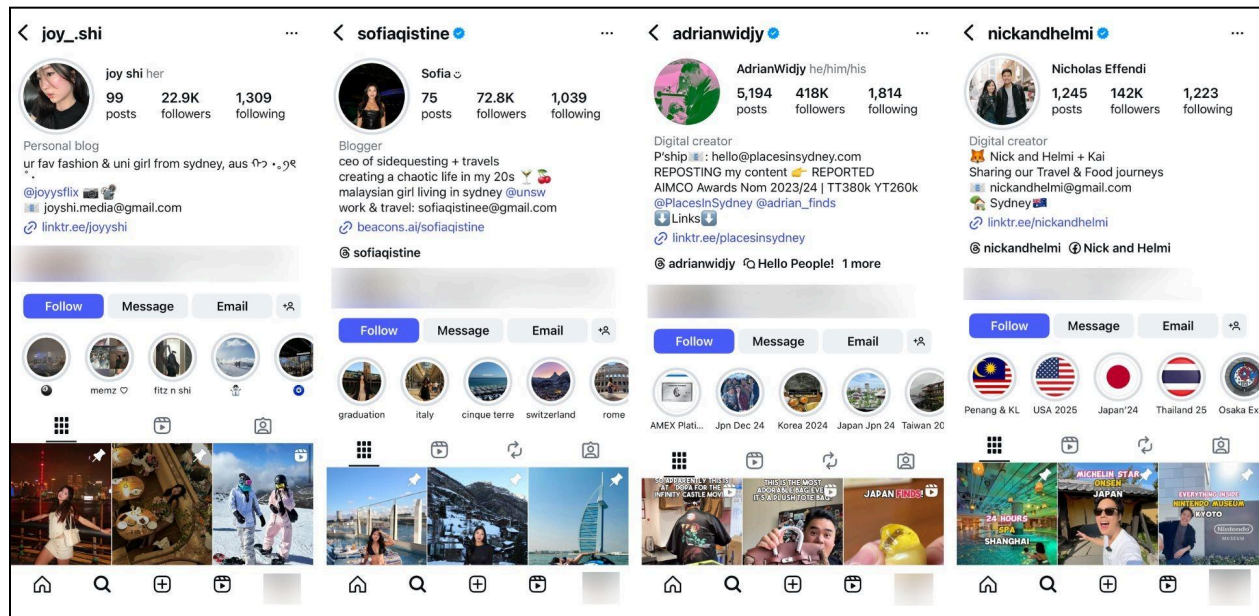
Beyond competitive pressures, the COVID-19 pandemic also played a key role in accelerating Instagram’s commercialisation. During the lockdowns in 2020, users increasingly turned online for entertainment, connection, and shopping, with Instagram usage rising by 43% compared to the previous year (Turner & Ordonia, 2023). In response, Instagram introduced in-app shopping (Change 29 in Table 1) to capitalise on the surge in e-commerce. Simultaneously, users began sharing hobbies and everyday practices more actively, which further amplified engagement with Reels (Change 28 in Table 1) as both a marketing tool and a channel for content monetisation.

Collectively, these developments show that Instagram’s evolution has been driven not only by internal innovation but also by external competition and wider societal change. The platform has strategically repositioned itself as an integrated “all-in-one” hub, accommodating diverse user needs—from personal expression and creativity to digital marketing and commerce. Its trajectory reflects a dual strategy: relying on imitation by “copying” rival features, while leveraging global events such as COVID-19 to consolidate its prominence within the SNS landscape. Ultimately, Instagram seeks to position itself as the singular platform users require, offering a comprehensive ecosystem designed to minimise the appeal of alternatives.

### Content Creation and Platform Economy

This integration of features not only streamlines the user experience but also forms opportunities for new ways of digital participation, particularly in content creation and the platform economy. As Instagram continues to expand its tools (Table 1), the boundary between ordinary users and professional influencers has also become increasingly blurred. In its early years, content creation was largely dominated by celebrities (e.g., Karlie Kloss, Justin Bieber, and Taylor Swift), whose fame and cultural authority drew brand sponsorships. Today, however, regular users can achieve comparable visibility and financial rewards—not through stardom, but by producing content that aligns with commercial imperatives (Nouri, 2018; Zhuang et al., 2023; Bleier et al., 2024). Public UGC creators like @joy\_.shi, @sofiaqistine, @adrianwidjy, and @nickandhelmi (Figure 2) exemplify this shift. What appears as “authentic” self-expression or casual documentation of

daily life is often carefully curated, sponsored, or linked to paid collaborations. These creators monetise their influence by reviewing or promoting products and services in exchange for complimentary goods or direct payment (Frowijn et al., 2022; Edeling & Wies, 2024). In effect, Instagram has shifted from a platform for personal storytelling into one in which “authenticity” itself is commodified and repackaged as a marketing tool. The distinction between genuine self-expression and commercial advertising has become increasingly difficult to discern, showing how Instagram embeds commercial logics even within seemingly ordinary acts of sharing.



**Figure 2.** Public UGC Creators’ Instagram Profiles

The commodification of authenticity was not embedded in Instagram’s original design; rather, it emerged through the platform’s continual expansion of features. As outlined earlier, Instagram’s growing suite of tools has enabled regular users to transition into UGC creators, or what Conde and Casais (2023) define as micro-influencers: “SNS users with a moderately sized but engaged following—typically between 1,000 and 100,000—who focus on a specific niche area” (p. 2). Unlike traditional celebrities with broad, undefined audiences, micro-influencers are perceived as more authentic and relatable, cultivating stronger connections within their communities. This perceived authenticity enhances their influence, making them especially attractive to brands and businesses seeking to reach targeted audiences (Conde & Casais, 2023). Within this framework,

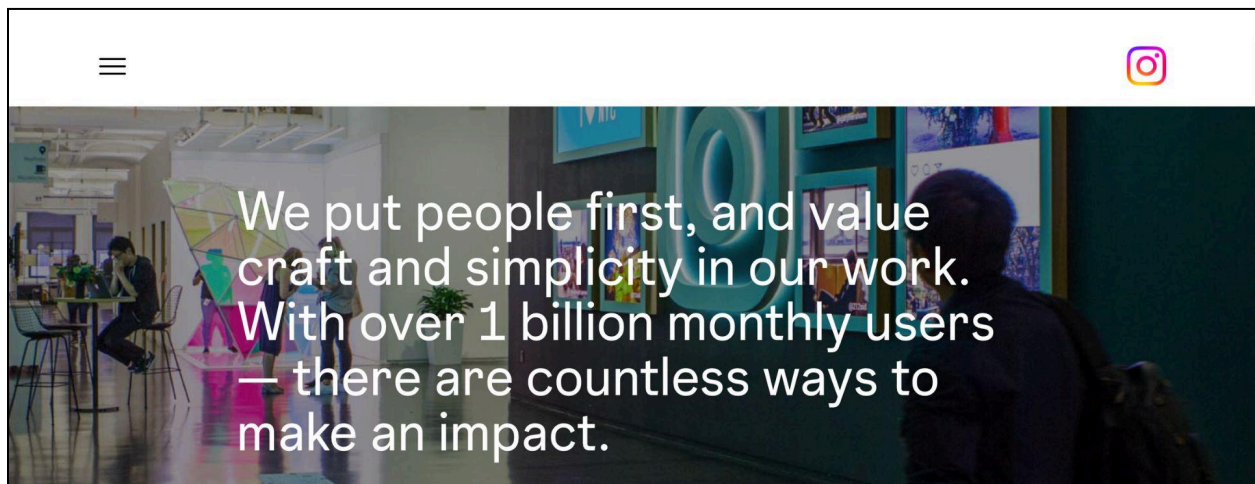
UGC creators on Instagram operate as micro-influencers, leveraging features such as Hashtags, Ads, Reels, Broadcast Channels, and Meta Verified (the “Blue Tick”) (Changes 2, 5, 28, 37, and 38 in Table 1) to boost visibility, maintain audience engagement, and monetise their content.

The expansion of these features has fuelled a broader cultural shift in which content creation is increasingly viewed as a legitimate career path. Today, many individuals are moving away from conventional forms of employment and turning to content creation, drawn by its flexibility, creative freedom, and perceived accessibility as a source of income (Jennings, 2021; Hoose & Rosenbohm, 2024). At the same time, this trend further blurs the boundary between authentic self-expression and monetised content, making it harder to differentiate between personal sharing and promotional material. As Instagram continues to democratise access to content creation, it distances itself from its origins as an SNS for casual, everyday sharing. Personal content is now reframed as “economic value”—something easily monetised and exchanged—rooting Instagram more deeply within the platform economy (Frowijn et al., 2022). This process creates a mutually profitable cycle: UGC creators gain exposure and material rewards, while brands and businesses benefit from the extended reach, credibility, and influence generated through creators’ audiences.

Extending this analysis, the platform economy offers a valuable framework for understanding the economic structures that underpin Instagram’s development. Acquier et al. (2017) describe the platform economy as “a set of initiatives that intermediate decentralised exchanges among peers through digital platforms” (p. 5). Unlike conventional firms that produce goods and services directly, platforms generate value by hosting and governing interactions, extracting profit from the peer-to-peer exchanges they enable. Two attributes are key to this model: (1) value derives from facilitating transactions rather than direct production, and (2) platforms consolidate power through network effects, increasing in value as more users and providers join (Acquier et al., 2017). Instagram exemplifies this logic. While it does not produce content itself, it provides the infrastructure through which users—both creators and consumers—interact, share content, and participate in sponsored transactions. As more users, brands, and businesses engage, Instagram’s value and influence grow, reinforcing its role as a content-driven, revenue-generating hub. In doing so, the platform not only embeds itself within the platform economy but also accelerates its transformation from an SNS into a business-oriented app.

### Instagram’s Founding Mission Statement

Ironically, this shift is striking when contrasted with its founding vision. Instagram’s co-founders initially conceived the app as a forum where individuals could “share their lives through photos”, centred on visually stunning moments and genuine social interaction (Holak & McLaughlin, 2017; Murariu, 2023; Uday, 2024). Its three core values—“community first, inspire creativity, and simplicity matters” (Frier, 2020, pp. 112-113)—embodied a commitment to intimacy and meaningful connection. Central to Instagram’s early experience was the simple act of sharing personal moments through photos, a principle that shaped both its design and cultural reception. Yet, this ethos now sits uneasily alongside Instagram’s commercial turn. Although these values remain publicly stated on its “About Us” page (Meta, 2025e) (Figure 3), their credibility is increasingly contested as the platform’s design choices and growing feature complexity depart from the founding priorities of “simplicity” and “community”. While Instagram arguably still facilitates social connection, these interactions are now often mediated by monetised experiences and commercialised visibility. What once promised genuine closeness has instead become highly curated and inauthentic—less about fostering community than sustaining profit.



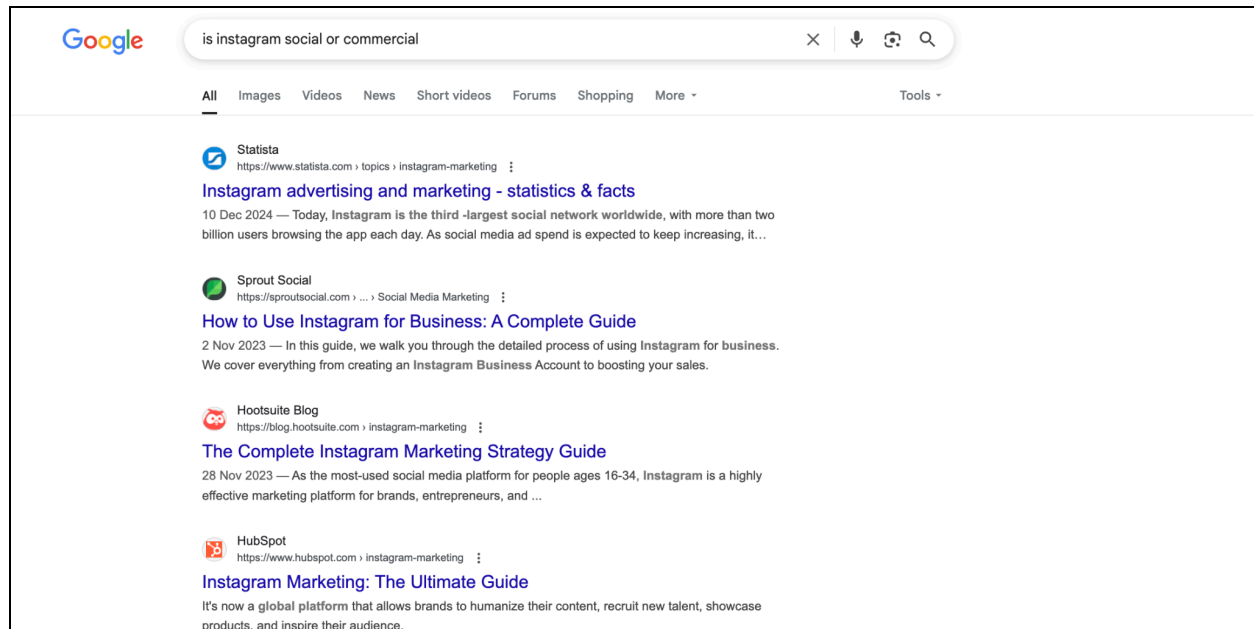
**Figure 3.** Instagram’s “About Us” Website Page (Meta, 2025e)

As Uday (2024) notes, “Instagram wasn’t just user growth; it was a cultural phenomenon in the making”, captivating users with its simple yet elegant interface that made it easy to document and share everyday life. From travel adventures to artistic expression, Instagram initially served

as a space for authentic, lived moments. While these practices have not entirely vanished, they have been subsumed into a larger commercial logic in which personal experiences and the “Self” are now curated, monetised, and reframed as “marketable products” (Ayoub, 2022, p. 17). This shift has obscured the line between personal identity and economic value, giving rise to the “Commodity Society”, where individuals increasingly view themselves as goods to be branded, promoted, and sold (Ayoub, 2022). Daily routines, hobbies, and personal moments—once private and casual—are now reimagined as income-generating assets, illustrating how, within today’s SNS terrain, almost anything can be commercialised (Ayoub, 2022; Jourdain & Naulin, 2024).

While this growth has undoubtedly created new economic opportunities for users, it has also raised critical concerns about the commodification of the “Self” and the erosion of authenticity (Ayoub, 2022; Ferdinands, 2022; Frowijn et al., 2022). Under Facebook’s ownership from 2012, the introduction of monetisation tools marked a paradigmatic shift in the platform’s logic—from a user-driven space to a profit-oriented infrastructure. This reorientation significantly expanded Instagram’s scope, enabling it to operate as a multifunctional platform that incorporates personal, creative, and commercial uses. As I argue, these developments have converted Instagram from an SNS into an emerging “all-in-one” hub—consolidating personal expression, digital marketing, e-commerce, and platform labour within a single ecosystem.

Tellingly, a Google search for “Is Instagram social or commercial?” yields primarily blogs and articles on business and marketing strategies, with none addressing its social function (Figure 4). This absence reflects a cultural shift in how Instagram is perceived and positioned. What began as a platform for sharing personal moments and fostering connections has been redefined as a commercial environment. More broadly, this mirrors a societal trend toward the commodification of everyday life, where users are no longer passive participants but active contributors to the platform economy. They engage in what Toffler (1980, as cited in Ritzer et al., 2012) terms as ‘prosumption’—the simultaneous production and consumption of content that generates economic value. With over 207 million content creators worldwide (Balkhi, 2023) and 75% of brands and businesses using Instagram to reach consumers (Ghosh, 2025), it is apparent that the platform now functions primarily as a tool for commerce and digital marketing rather than as a traditional SNS.



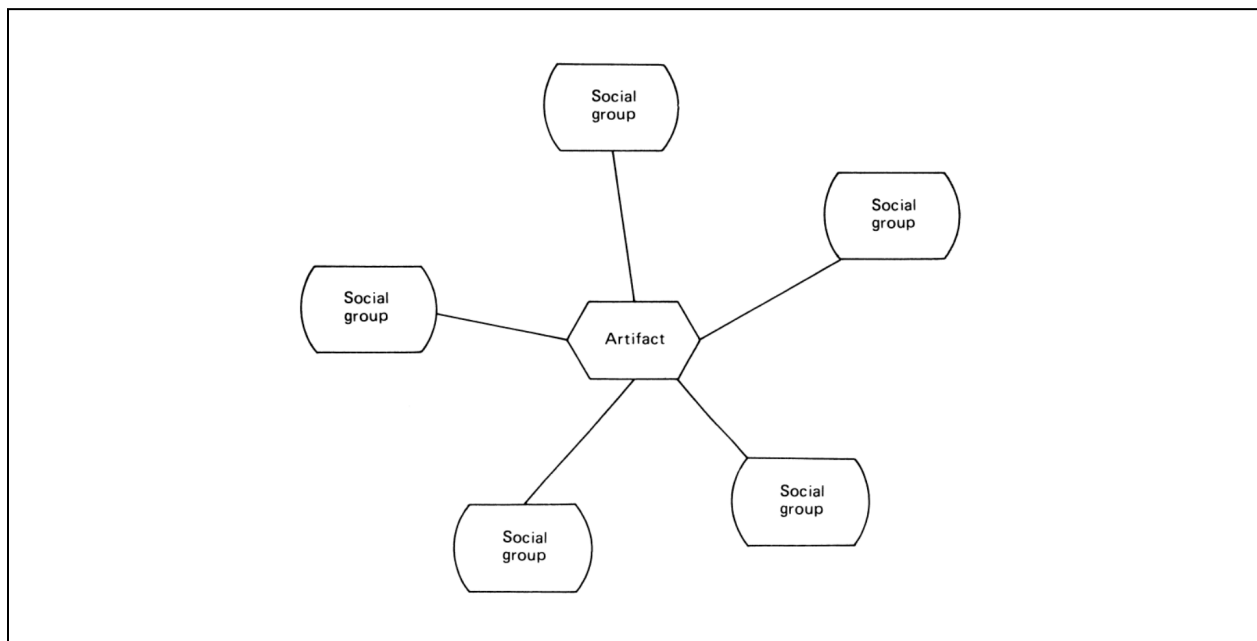
**Figure 4.** Google Search for “Is Instagram social or commercial?”

## 2.1 The Social Construction of Technology

Instagram’s expansion of features over the years can be effectively examined through the social construction of technology (SCOT) framework. Introduced by Pinch and Bijker (1987), SCOT explores the close relationship between technology and society. It contends that technologies are not fixed products or static tools but are shaped by the views, needs, and practices of different social groups. Contrary to deterministic accounts that frame technological growth as “linear and autonomous” (p. 16), SCOT emphasises the role of human agency, collective values, and cultural contexts in shaping a technology’s design, evolution, and significance (Pinch & Bijker, 1987). In this view, technologies are dynamic—continually analysed, negotiated, and redefined according to the diverse interests and demands of their users. To fully understand a technological artifact, therefore, it is necessary to study beyond its material form to the wider sociocultural context and the values and meanings that drive its evolution (Pinch & Bijker, 1987).

This framework is articulated through four key concepts that demonstrate how social dynamics drive technological growth. First, interpretive flexibility emphasises that technologies are socially constructed and open to multiple interpretations. This flexibility applies not only to how

technologies are perceived but also to how they can be designed and redesigned over time (Pinch & Bijker, 1987). Put simply, technologies are not fixed in meaning or form; rather, they evolve through the understandings and practices of different social groups. Each group's distinct values and needs guide the direction of development, reinforcing that "there is not just one possible way or one best way of designing an artifact" (Pinch & Bijker, 1987, p. 34). On this basis, the second concept, relevant social groups (Figure 5), identifies the "actors" (Pinch & Bijker, 1987, p. 22)—such as users, producers, designers, and engineers—who assign meaning to a technology and define the "problems" associated with it. These groups influence both how a technology is perceived and how it physically develops. Hence, technologies are never created in isolation but are continuously "negotiated" through the values, views, and interactions of the groups engaged with them (Pinch & Bijker, 1987).

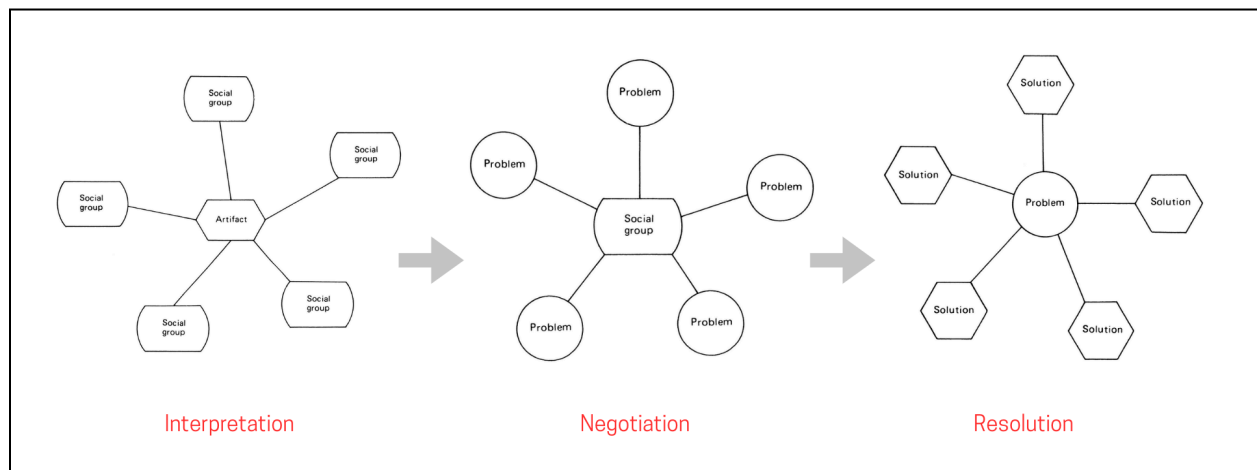


**Figure 5.** The Relationship Between an Artifact and the Relevant Social Groups  
(Pinch & Bijker, 1987, p. 29, figure 8)

As these negotiations progress, the third concept—closure and stabilisation—comes into play. This stage marks the shift from interpretive flexibility to a shared consensus, where a technology becomes widely accepted and "stabilised" in both structure and meaning. *Closure* happens when

debates and competing interpretations among social groups are resolved, typically through two primary processes: (1) rhetorical closure, where a technology is framed as the most successful option even if alternatives exist; or (2) closure by the redefinition of the problem, where an issue is reframed so that it no longer appears problematic. In such cases, closure stems not from changes to the technology itself but from shifts in how the problem is understood, allowing the “controversy to disappear” (Pinch & Bijker, 1987, pp. 37-39). Once closure is accomplished, a dominant design gains acceptance and enters a stage of *stabilisation*, with its features “taken for granted as the essential ingredients” of the technology (Pinch & Bijker, 1987, p. 30). From this point, the final concept, the multidirectional model, shows that technological evolution is not linear but unfolds through cycles of *variation* (the different versions and components explored) and *selection* (the evaluation of these variations to determine which best meet user needs) (p. 22). This process creates multiple possible directions or solutions, shaped by the interpretations and negotiations of diverse social groups (Pinch & Bijker, 1987).

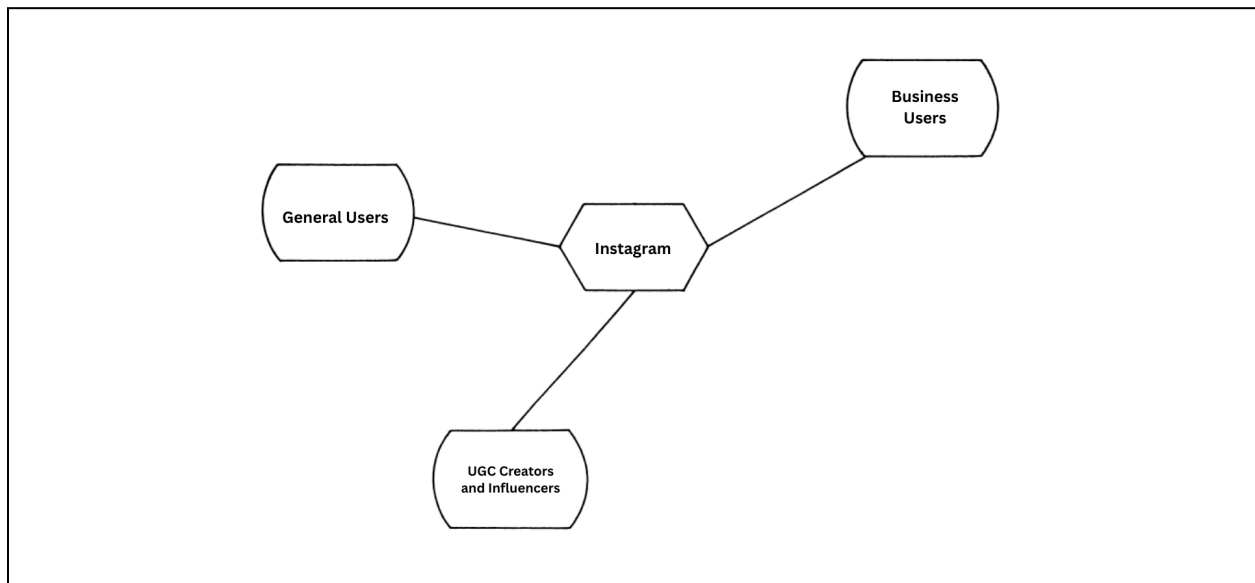
Ultimately, technological development is socially contingent, shaped by the needs, demands, and perspectives of various social groups. As illustrated in Figure 6, SCOT captures this as a cyclical process in which technologies move through stages of interpretation, negotiation, and resolution (Pinch & Bijker, 1987).



**Figure 6.** SCOT’s Stages of Technological Development  
(Pinch & Bijker, 1987, pp. 29-30, Figures 8, 9, 10)

### 2.1.1 Application of SCOT on Instagram

Through the lens of SCOT, Instagram’s evolution can be understood as the outcome of ongoing interactions among various relevant social groups. The platform has continually adapted to meet shifting needs and expectations, with three social groups in particular—**General Users**, **Business Users (i.e., brands and businesses)**, and **UGC Creators and Influencers**—playing especially influential roles in shaping its design and functionality (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** The Relationship Between Instagram and Its Social Groups  
(Adapted from Pinch & Bijker, 1987, p. 29, Figure 8)

#### General Users

When Instagram launched in 2010, it featured a chronological feed that displayed posts in order from oldest to newest (Change 1 in Table 1). However, this changed in 2016 when the platform replaced it with a non-chronological, algorithm-driven timeline (Change 12 in Table 1). Instead of presenting posts in order of publication, the new feed prioritised “recommended” content and “posts you may like”, based on factors such as user interests, prior engagement, and relationships with other accounts (Eg et al., 2023). Although designed to boost engagement by ranking posts based on what a user cared most about and to keep them on the app longer by showing more “relevant” content (Mosseri, 2021), the update provoked widespread dissatisfaction. Many users

reported seeing posts from outside their networks, while updates from accounts they actually followed were buried (Bon, 2016; Crook, 2016; Kane, 2017). To ensure their followings' content remained visible, users were expected to engage more frequently—by liking, commenting, or sharing—since the algorithm prioritised content from accounts with which they interacted most (Eg et al., 2023; Mosseri, 2021). One Reddit user captured this frustration: “I keep missing 90% of posts, and my friends ask me why I ignore their content. I know you wouldn't be able to keep up when 1000+ followers post daily, but it's stupid that I have to manually check the profile of every single one of them” (Mariadefilippisuca, 2021). Such reactions revealed a clear disconnect between user expectations and platform design, sparking significant criticism.

In response, Instagram launched the Favourites and Following tabs in 2022 (Change 32 in Table 1), giving users the option to once again view posts in chronological order and framing this move as a way of “restoring control” to users (Mosseri, 2022). This reflects SCOT's concept of closure and stabilisation: the relevant social group—general users—identified a problem based on their experiences, and Instagram sought to resolve it by reframing the feed as a matter of choice and personalisation. Rather than discarding the algorithmic timeline, the platform pursued *rhetorical closure* (Pinch & Bijker, 1987), positioning the new tabs as a “solution” that diffused criticism while keeping the algorithmic feed as the default. As Pinch and Bijker (1987) assert, “to close a technological controversy, one need not *solve* the problems in the common sense of that word. The key point is whether the relevant social groups *see* the problem as being solved” (p. 37). In this case, the controversy surrounding the feed largely “disappeared” as Instagram attempted to “close” the concern by offering an alternative tab, enabling the feature to be “stabilised” within Instagram's ecosystem as a widely accepted design.

### Business Users

As noted earlier, Instagram has become an essential tool for business users—particularly brands and businesses—who rely on the platform for effective marketing and broader audience reach (Challa & Anute, 2021; Chaudhary, 2021). Despite periodically releasing updated versions of Instagram Insights (Changes 14 and 19 in Table 1), many business users voiced frustration with its limited functionality. Key concerns included the removal of certain metrics, insufficient tools for deeper analysis, and difficulties accessing key performance data (Emplifi, 2025)—leading to

user dissatisfaction and a perceived “lack of accuracy of advertising performance data provided” (ACCC, 2023). These flaws amplified as the platform evolved; for example, the rollout of longer 90-second Reels and 20-slide Carousels (Changes 33 and 48 in Table 1) rendered older versions of Insights outdated and inadequate for accurately tracking engagement. As a Reddit user said, “It’s useless now, as a business owner. We need data to work with...Instagram has frustrated me a lot recently with inaccurate insights” (Rayge96, 2024). This reflects the intensity of criticism Instagram faced when changes to metrics undermined the reliability of its analytics tools.

To address these challenges, Instagram introduced an updated version of its Insights tool with enhanced features, such as Reel and Carousel analytics, post-level follower growth segmented by age, gender, and location, and more precise engagement timing (Change 53 in Table 1). These updates equipped business users with more comprehensive tools to assess content performance and better understand follower acquisition patterns (Thornhill, 2025). This evolution mirrors SCOT’s multidirectional model: each new version of Insights represented a stage of *variation*, as Instagram experimented with different metrics and analytic capabilities. However, many of these iterations fell short of business users’ demands for greater accuracy and detail. Their feedback acted as the mechanism of *selection*, shaping Instagram’s decision to retain and refine specific features that aligned with both platform changes and the marketing needs of business users (Pinch & Bijker, 1987). As such, Instagram’s final configuration of Insights illustrates how user criticism and business needs collectively determined which design variations persisted.

### UGC Creators and Influencers

According to Collabstr (2025), Instagram now hosts around 100,000 UGC creators, reflecting a 93% year-over-year growth. With the global creator economy projected to reach \$528.39 billion by 2030 (Collabstr, 2025), Instagram’s evolution is also shaped by the practices and needs of this expanding social group. Originally, the platform functioned purely as an SNS without built-in video editing tools. Yet, as the creator economy surged in the mid-2020s, many UGC creators and influencers began using third-party apps like CapCut to edit their content before uploading it to Instagram (Gasner, 2025). This case reflects a different dynamic from earlier analyses. Instead of responding to vocal complaints, Instagram itself identified the problem: creators’ reliance on external editing software, which it perceived as a threat to platform loyalty (Oyedeji, 2025). This

connects back to SCOT's interpretive flexibility. While UGC creators and influencers may not have regarded third-party apps as an issue, Instagram interpreted their behaviour as a “problem” requiring intervention.

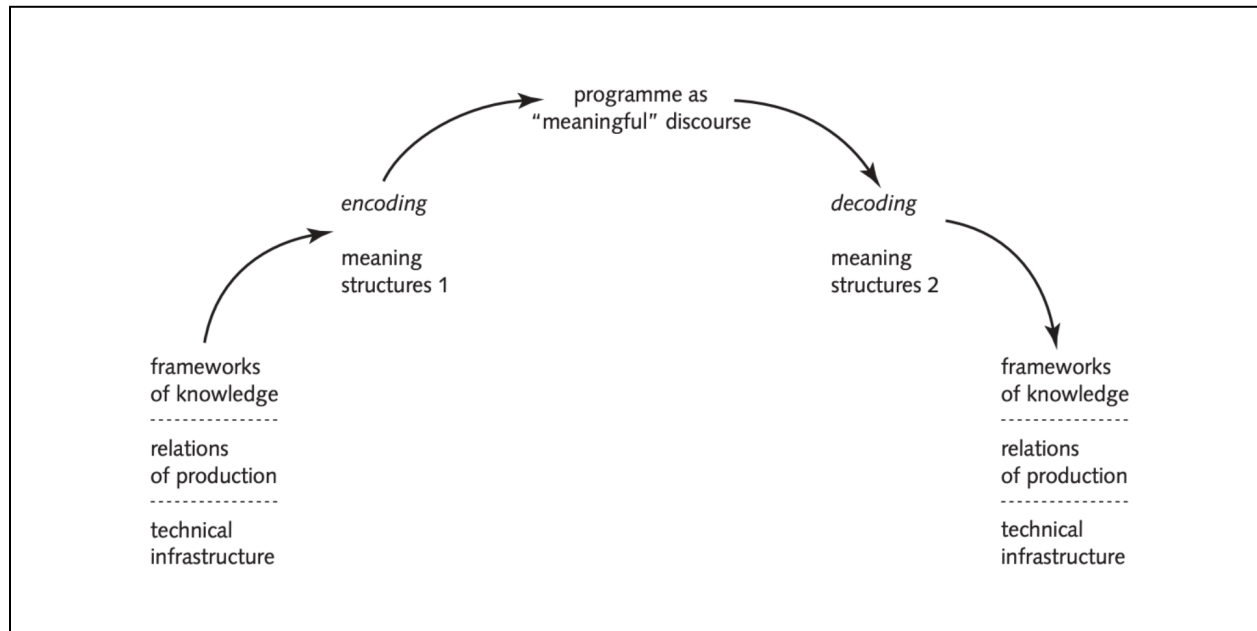
In response, Instagram released its own video editing app, Instagram Edits (Change 46 in Table 1). This move represents *variation*—a technological alternative designed to keep creators within its ecosystem rather than relying on external tools (Oyedeji, 2025). In this case, *selection* was not about resolving dissatisfaction but about strategically responding to observed practices within a relevant social group. By offering advanced, native editing tools, Instagram pursued a “direction” that aligned with both creators' needs for convenience and its own goal of retaining users (Meta, 2025f; Gasner, 2025). As Pinch and Bijker (1987) argue, problems need not be explicitly voiced; when the actions and interpretations of a social group signal a need for change, developers may respond accordingly. Here, Instagram treated UGC creators' and influencers' reliance on CapCut as evidence of such a need. The launch of Instagram Edits was thus shaped not by direct user demands, but by the *social meanings* embedded in creator practices.

## **2.2 The Encoding and Decoding Model**

Having applied SCOT to explore how different social groups shape Instagram's design according to their needs and perspectives, Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding and decoding (E/D) model offers a complementary framework for understanding how users interpret and respond to the platform's continual feature expansion and evolving design.

The E/D model explains how media messages are produced, distributed, and interpreted within the communication process (Hall, 1973). Rather than viewing communication as a simple, linear transfer from sender to receiver, Hall (1973) emphasises that meaning is actively co-constructed by producers (through encoding) and audiences (through decoding). While producers encode messages with intended meanings, audiences may interpret or understand them in varied ways. As he asserts, communication is a “complex structure of relations” (p. 163), where “meanings are *not* apparently fixed” (p. 168), but negotiated between both sides (Hall, 1973). Central to this model are two interrelated processes: *encoding*, where producers transform ideas into messages using codes, conventions, and cultural references directed at a target audience; and *decoding*,

where audiences interpret these messages based on their own social contexts, experiences, and knowledge (Hall, 1973). Figure 8 illustrates this cyclical process, showing how messages move from encoding to decoding within broader frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, and technical infrastructure (Hall, 1973).



**Figure 8.** Encoding and Decoding of Broadcast Structures

(Hall, 1973, p. 165, Figure 13.1)

Hall (1973) exemplifies this dynamic through the example of broadcast communication. On the *encoding* side, producers—such as broadcasters—construct messages within “meaning structures 1”, which influence how ideas are organised into a programme or media text that circulates as “meaningful discourse”. On the *decoding* side, audiences interpret this discourse by generating their own “meaning structures 2” (Hall, 1973, p. 165). While both processes are influenced by similar factors, these structures may differ from those of the producers, as they “do not constitute an immediate identity” (Hall, 1973, p. 166). This asymmetry means that “the codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical” (Hall, 1973, p. 166). As a result, audiences may interpret messages through one of three decoding positions: (1) Dominant-Hegemonic Reading; (2) Negotiated Reading; or (3) Oppositional Reading (Hall, 1973).

### 2.2.1 Application of the E/D Model on Instagram

Applying the E/D model, Instagram users can be investigated in terms of whether they *accept*, *negotiate*, or *oppose* the intended meanings embedded in the platform's feature development. The following discussion connects Hall's three decoding positions to the same Instagram feature examples examined in SCOT, illustrating how the two frameworks intersect.

#### Dominant-Hegemonic Reading

The first position occurs when the audience fully *accepts* the producer's intended meaning and decodes the message using the same reference codes in which it was encoded. As Hall (1973) describes, this signifies the "ideal typical case of perfectly transparent communication" (p. 171), where the message is received exactly as planned. Thereby, the audience reproduces "dominant" ideologies, often without realising or critiquing their underlying hegemonic nature (Hall, 1973).

This position is evident in the case of Instagram Edits (Change 46 in Table 1), a feature designed to retain creators within Instagram's ecosystem and strengthen platform loyalty (Oyedemi, 2025). Encoded as a simple yet practical video-editing tool, the message was clear: external apps like CapCut were no longer necessary, as Instagram now offered "everything they need" to produce polished, professional content within a single, seamless process (Meta, 2025f). Many creators adopted this position without resistance. As one creator, Smylie (2025) commented, "I've made three reels so far. Love the ease of use and similarity to editing videos with multiple track lines like CapCut, without the pop-ups and ads of CapCut free. Love the font choices, insights, easy animations and in-app music library". Such responses depict how the feature was interpreted exactly as intended—affirming the platform's sufficiency in meeting creators' professional and creative needs.

In this sense, Instagram's encoded intentions aligned closely with user interpretations, securing creator loyalty under the impression of convenience and "making things easier", while its deeper strategic aim of user retention stayed largely unquestioned. By embracing this position, creators not only reinforced Instagram's strategic positioning but also deepened their dependence on the platform, demonstrating how *hegemonic meanings* are accepted as "common sense constructs" (p. 169) when presented through the language of ease and creative empowerment (Hall, 1973).

### Negotiated Reading

The second position arises when the audience understands and *partially accepts* the dominant meanings encoded in a message but *adapts* them to fit their own contexts. This reading blends acceptance and resistance: while audiences acknowledge the legitimacy of dominant definitions, they reinterpret them in light of personal, social, or situational circumstances (Hall, 1973). This negotiated stance is marked by internal contradictions, as moments of agreement with dominant ideologies coexist with critical questioning, revealing how audience interpretations are shaped by unequal relations to power and discourse (Hall, 1973).

Instagram’s release of the Favourites and Following tabs (Change 32 in Table 1) exemplifies this position. Encoded as a feature to enhance user control and transparency in response to criticism of the algorithmic timeline, the change was presented as a user-driven improvement while still preserving the algorithmic “Home” feed as dominant (Mosseri, 2022). Users’ engagement with both feeds reflects a negotiated position, *partially accepting* Instagram’s logic of personalisation while simultaneously seeking to retain a sense of authenticity and autonomy in their experience.

### Oppositional Reading

Lastly, the third position occurs when audiences fully understand both the literal and connotative meanings intended by the producer but *reject* them outright, instead decoding the message in an *opposing* manner. In this stance, they deconstruct the preferred code and reinterpret the message through an “alternative framework of reference” (Hall, 1973, p. 173). As Hall (1973) explains, “the ‘politics of signification’—the struggle in discourse—is joined” (p. 173), meaning that when audiences resist dominant messages, they are not merely decoding them but actively contesting meaning itself.

This position can also be seen in Instagram Edits (Change 46 in Table 1). Encoded to promote convenience by integrating editing and publishing within the platform, the feature was designed to strengthen user reliance on Instagram’s ecosystem (Meta, 2025f; Oyedeji, 2025). However, some creators *rejected* this intention, choosing instead to edit their videos on external apps such as CapCut, InShot, Splice, Final Cut Pro, or Adobe Premiere Pro, which offer more advanced, professional tools and greater creative flexibility (Haberman, 2025; Gasner, 2025; Taheer, 2025).

This response represents an oppositional reading—creators acknowledge Instagram’s attempt to centralise creative production but *reject* it by asserting autonomy through third-party software.

Ultimately, Hall’s (1973) three decoding positions reveal the varied ways users engage with and interpret Instagram’s evolving design and encoded meanings. These positions demonstrate that audiences are not passive recipients of technological affordances but active participants who continually shape and redefine the platform’s social significance through their interactions and interpretations. This assertion aligns with Pinch and Bijker’s (1987) SCOT framework, which likewise underscores that technology is socially constructed through continual processes of interpretation, negotiation, and contestation. These theoretical frameworks form the conceptual basis for the analysis presented in Chapter 4, where participants’ interpretations of Instagram’s features and their corresponding decoding patterns are examined in greater depth.

### **Literature Review Summary**

In summary, this chapter has examined Instagram’s transformation from a photo-sharing SNS into a highly commercialised, multifunctional platform embedded within the broader platform economy and culture of content creation. By tracing its historical trajectory, feature evolution, and shifting user practices, it has shown how technological innovation, market pressures, and cultural change have collectively influenced Instagram’s identity as an “all-in-one” hub for self-expression, creativity, commerce, and social connection. The integration of SCOT and the E/D model provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the dynamic interplay between technological design, user interpretation, and meaning-making on the platform. Together, these frameworks reveal that Instagram’s features function not merely as technical affordances but as socially negotiated structures that reflect broader power relations and cultural values.

Therefore, this study asks: *How has Instagram’s evolution into a commercial and content-driven platform reshaped user engagement, particularly in socialising and maintaining personal connections?* The following chapter outlines the qualitative methodology adopted to address this question, detailing the methods used to explore users’ lived experiences and decoding practices within Instagram’s evolving ecosystem.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

This study employed a qualitative mixed-method approach—using in-depth interviews alongside the walkthrough method—to explore how long-term Instagram users have adapted to its ongoing development. Focusing on users in Australia who joined the platform in 2015 or earlier, the study examined whether they continued to perceive Instagram primarily as an SNS or if its commercial shift had redefined their overall user experience. This study also analysed Instagram’s design and features to understand how its interface, affordances, and structural changes have shaped user interaction and engagement over time.

### 3.1 In-depth Interviews

Given the user-centred nature of this research, in-depth interviews were selected as the primary qualitative method to explore participants’ perceptions, interpretations, and lived experiences of Instagram—from early adoption to current practices. In-depth interviews involve one-on-one, open-ended conversations to elicit detailed insights into individuals’ experiences, attitudes, and meanings related to a specific topic (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). This approach was especially well-suited to this study, as it enabled a deep exploration of users’ subjective understandings, allowing them to reflect on and articulate how they engage with and make sense of Instagram in their daily lives. As Rutledge and Hogg (2020) assert, “in-depth interviewing techniques *should be* employed when details about an individual’s beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours are critical to a research question” (p. 2).

#### Participant Recruitment and Criteria

Before conducting the interviews, inclusion criteria were established to ensure that participants aligned with the study’s objectives. A screening process using an eligibility survey administered through REDCap (see Appendix A) confirmed that all participants met the following criteria:

1. Be 18 years old or older;
2. Be an Australian citizen or permanent resident (PR) living in Australia;
3. Have an active history of Instagram use;
4. Started using Instagram in 2015 or earlier.

These criteria ensured that participants were experienced users capable of providing meaningful, long-term reflections on their engagement with Instagram. Participants were *ordinary users*—not UGC creators or influencers—as this study sought to understand how they adapt, navigate and negotiate Instagram’s expanding features, especially as the platform has integrated more business tools, advertising systems, and content-creation functions. The timeframe of 2015 or earlier was deliberately chosen because Instagram primarily functioned as an SNS between 2010 and 2015. The 2016 logo and app redesign (Figure 1) marked a pivotal turning point, signalling Instagram’s transition from a photo-sharing app into a commercial, curated ecosystem centred on branding, advertising, and content creation (Knorr, 2017). Including participants who witnessed this shift firsthand provided longitudinal insights into how Instagram’s evolving design and affordances have shaped users’ perceptions, practices, and sense of connection over time.

Participants were recruited through a Reddit post and an Instagram ad, which were circulated over one month from August to September 2025. The Instagram ad was configured to reach Australian users aged 18 and above, ensuring nationwide coverage rather than being limited to Sydney. The Reddit post was shared in Australian community forums (e.g., r/usyd, r/australia) to attract ordinary users with varied backgrounds. In total, 43 individuals expressed interest, of whom 10 met the inclusion criteria and were subsequently interviewed. Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the final sample, including age, gender, and years of Instagram use. As shown, participants ranged in age from 24 to 35, with most reporting more than 10 years of Instagram use. This demographic spread provided perspectives across different stages of life while maintaining the longitudinal experience necessary to reflect on Instagram’s evolution.

**Table 2.** Interview Participants’ Demographic Characteristics

No.	Participant Name (Pseudonym):	Age:	Gender:	Years of Instagram Use:
1.	Cal	26	Male	3 years
2.	Soph	27	Female	11 years
3.	Dana	28	Female	10 years

4.	Jane	30	Female	11 years
5.	Luna	30	Female	9 years
6.	AL	30	Female	10 years
7.	Elle	27	Female	11 years
8.	Tay	35	Female	7 years
9.	Abby	31	Female	10 years
10.	Alex	24	Male	11 years

Once participants expressed interest and met the requirements, they were emailed a Participant Information Sheet outlining the study’s purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits, along with a Participant Consent Form to obtain their signed informed consent (see Appendix B). The research protocol also received ethical approval from the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Approval No. HE000782) before recruitment and data collection.

**Interview Design**

The interview design consisted of two opening questions, nine open-ended questions, and one closing question, all structured around key themes exploring participants’ evolving relationship with Instagram, its increasing commercialisation, and their engagement with its social, cultural, and algorithmic features (see Appendix C). Specifically, the first opening question—“What are the first three words that come to mind when you think of Instagram?”—was inspired by Carl Jung’s (1910) word association method, a psychological technique designed to reveal implicit attitudes and associations with a cue word. In this case, “Instagram” served as the cue, prompting participants to express their instinctive associations and uncover whether they primarily viewed Instagram as a social or commercial platform.

All interviews were conducted online via Zoom for accessibility and convenience. Each session lasted approximately one hour, allowing participants to share detailed and reflective insights about their experiences. I adopted a semi-structured format, following the prepared questions

while allowing flexibility to probe further where necessary—encouraging deeper, more nuanced responses (Albaret & Deas, 2023). In total, I conducted 10 interviews over four weeks from August to September 2025. All interviews were audio-recorded using Zoom’s recording function and were manually cross-checked to ensure the accuracy of the automated transcriptions. To maintain confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms when referenced in this study.

Although the sample size of 10 participants may appear small, it was considered sufficient as it achieved “information power” (Malterud et al., 2016), capturing diverse yet convergent views relevant to the study’s aims. As Malterud et al. (2016) explain, “the larger information power the sample holds, the lower  $N$  is needed” (p. 1754). This means that when participants possess rich, pertinent experience and the research focus is well-defined, a smaller sample can still generate meaningful insights. While a larger sample could have offered a broader range of Instagram user experiences, time constraints and recruitment challenges limited participation within the project’s timeframe. Nonetheless, the data collected provided sufficient depth and variation to address the study’s interpretive goals.

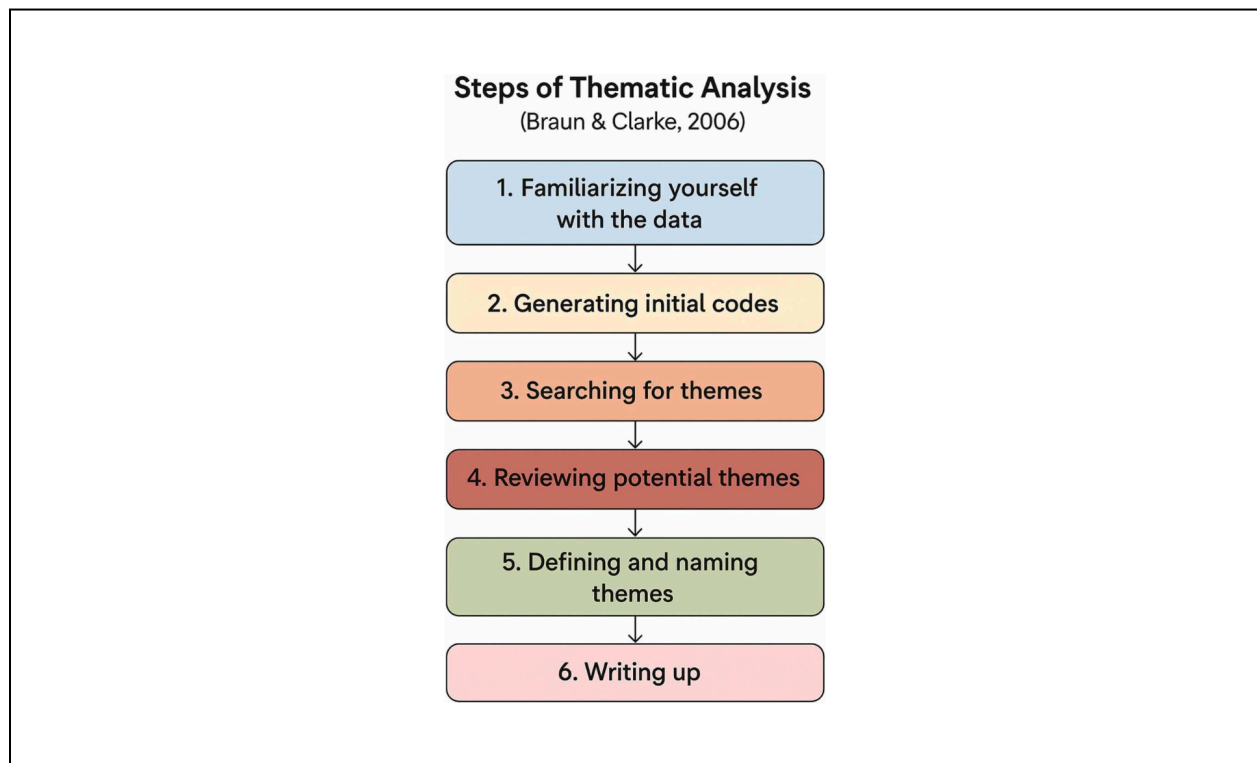
Beyond considerations of sample adequacy, it was equally essential to reflect on my positionality as a researcher. Reflexivity involves maintaining critical awareness of how personal experiences and assumptions may influence the research process (Ahmed et al., 2025). As both a researcher and long-term Instagram user, I was mindful that my familiarity with Instagram could shape how I understood participants’ responses. To mitigate this, I adopted a reflexive approach—actively recognising potential biases and grounding all interpretations in participants’ perspectives. This ensured that I remained “cognisant of how [my] assumptions and biases shape the analytic lens” (p. 3), thereby enhancing the rigour, transparency, and credibility of the study’s findings (Ahmed et al., 2025).

### Thematic Analysis

Following the completion of interviews and transcription, the data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns of meaning across the dataset. According to Ahmed et al. (2025), thematic analysis is a qualitative method for systematically examining data—such as interview transcripts—to uncover recurring concepts and their underlying significance. This

approach was chosen for its flexibility and capacity to capture the nuanced, interpretive nature of participants' experiences on Instagram, as it “gives researchers a fuller picture of the culture under investigation” (Naeem et al., 2023, p. 13).

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework (as cited in Ahmed et al., 2025, p. 2), which is recognised for its iterative and adaptable process (Figure 9). These steps provided a structured yet flexible roadmap for processing qualitative data, enhancing both the “rigour and depth of interpretation” (Ahmed et al., pp. 2-3). To manage and analyse the data systematically, I used Google Sheets (see Appendix D) to organise the interview transcripts into relevant quotes, codes, keywords, and both semantic and latent meanings. This process enabled me to visually map connections across participants' responses, group similar ideas, and identify recurring patterns, which were refined into overarching thematic clusters that addressed the key topics of the study.



**Figure 9.** The Six Phases in Thematic Analysis  
(Braun & Clarke, 2006, as cited in Ahmed et al., 2025, p. 2, Figure 1)

### 3.2 Walkthrough Method

To complement the interviews, the walkthrough method was employed as a secondary research approach to analyse Instagram’s interface, features, and affordances. This method involves a close, hands-on examination of an app to explore how its design and interface convey cultural meanings, shape user activity, and reflect embedded values. It examines how visual, functional, and navigational elements work together to guide user behaviour through design (Light et al., 2018). In practice, the walkthrough entails a step-by-step observation of the app—creating an account, exploring features, and documenting interface elements—to identify both its technical components (e.g., the placement or number of icons) and symbolic aspects (e.g., images, text, and design cues) (Light et al., 2018).

The walkthrough was structured around three stages of app use: (1) registration and entry, which capture onboarding and first impressions; (2) everyday use, referring to routine interaction; and (3) discontinuation of use, which involves logging out or leaving the app (Light et al., 2018). These stages provided a systematic framework for analysing how Instagram’s interface fosters habitual use and sustained interaction over time.

The analysis was further situated within Light et al.’s (2018, p. 889) concept of the “environment of expected use”, which explores how apps are designed to anticipate and shape user behaviour through three interconnected dimensions: (1) vision, how an app communicates its purpose and intended audience through branding, aesthetics, and messaging; (2) operating model, the app’s economic and technical systems—such as monetisation strategies, data practices, and feature design; and (3) governance, the formal and informal rules, policies, and algorithmic controls that regulate participation and interaction. Together, these dimensions provide insight into how the app’s designers and developers “expect users to receive and integrate it into their technology usage practices” (Light et al., 2018, p. 889).

Given Instagram’s continual updates and reconfigurations, this method was particularly suitable for the study. It allowed for a critical assessment of usability while revealing the technological and cultural assumptions embedded within its interface. Rather than treating Instagram as a neutral or purely functional platform, this approach positions it as a *site of power* that encodes

particular values, behaviours, and commercial imperatives (Light et al., 2018)—a perspective revisited in Chapter 4 when analysing Instagram’s changing interface and commercial logic.

### The Walkthrough Procedure

The walkthrough was conducted using the latest iOS version of Instagram (version 401.0.0) as of October 2025. A new account was created under the username @ttoi.000782 to ensure a neutral starting point, free from any prior activity, algorithmic influence, or personalised content. This allowed for an objective analysis of the platform’s default interface, onboarding experience, and content presentation as encountered by a first-time user.

The walkthrough was performed over multiple sessions, following Light et al.’s three stages of app use. Each session examined Instagram’s commercial and content-driven features—such as Reels and its algorithmic discovery flows; the Explore page and recommended posts; integrated ads across the Home feed and Stories; the Shop tab; creator and brand tools (e.g., professional dashboard and “boost post”); and data-driven prompts (e.g., “suggested for you” and “follow creators you may like”). Particular attention was given to how these features promote visibility, consumption, and monetisation over social connection, reflecting the platform’s shift from an SNS into a market-oriented platform. Additionally, I reviewed Instagram’s presentation on the Apple App Store to assess how the platform brands itself as an “all-in-one” hub for connection, creativity, and commerce. Observations were documented through annotated screenshots to capture visual, functional, and aesthetic aspects of the interface. These visual records were then cross-referenced with interview data to contextualise users’ narratives within Instagram’s evolving technical and commercial environment.

While the walkthrough method offers valuable insights into the app’s interface and design logic, it does not directly capture user content, individual activity, or attitudes (Light et al., 2018). As the walkthrough reflects my own interpretation of design cues, the findings are inevitably shaped by subjective perception. What I observed and interpreted may differ from how other users perceive the interface, as individuals can engage with and understand design elements in varied ways. Furthermore, this method does not indicate whether users are aware of, or actively engage with, certain features and updates. Hence, I adopted the walkthrough as a complementary method

to the interviews, facilitating a more holistic understanding of Instagram by combining user perspectives on long-term engagement with an analysis of the platform's evolving technical and commercial architecture.

### **Methodology Summary**

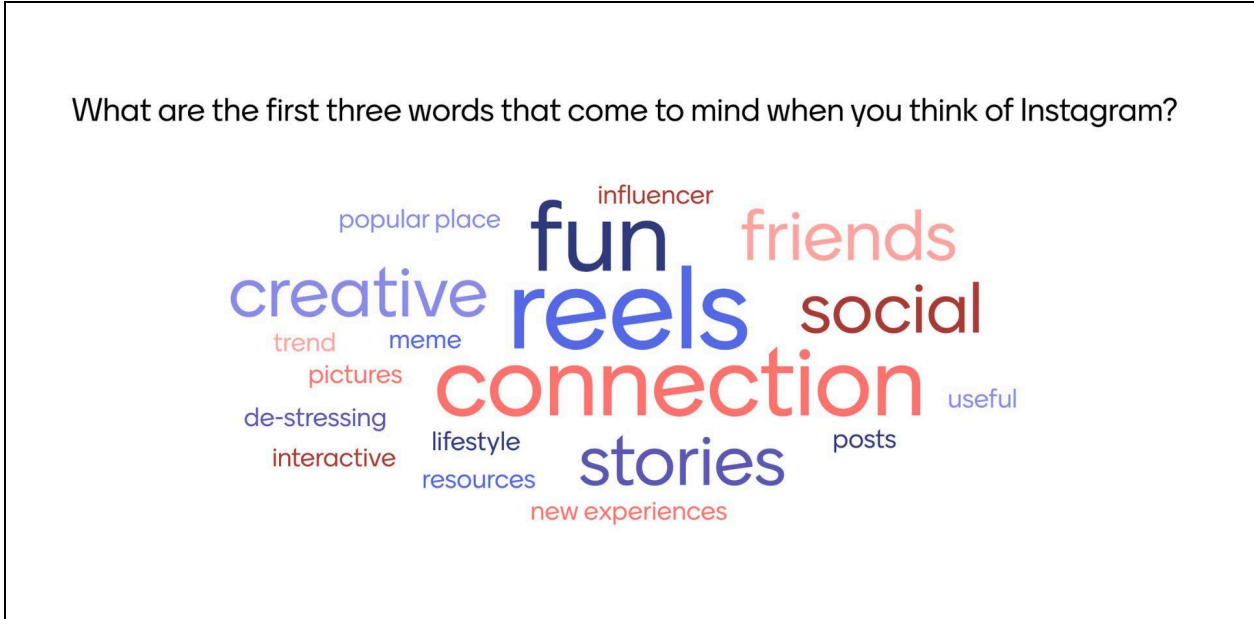
Ultimately, the in-depth interviews and the walkthrough method provided a comprehensive and complementary approach to this study, offering both user-centred and design-centred views on Instagram's evolution. While the interviews illuminated long-term users' lived experiences and perceptions of the platform, the walkthrough revealed how Instagram's interface, affordances, and commercial logic shape—and at times constrain—those experiences. Integrating these two approaches enabled a more profound understanding of how users and technology co-construct meaning: how users interpret Instagram's ongoing expansion and how its design embeds cultural and commercial expectations into everyday use. The findings from both methods are presented and discussed in detail in the following chapter.

## Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

To contextualise this study’s analysis of Instagram’s evolving role in shaping social engagement, it is first necessary to define “general users”. In this research, general users are understood as “everyday participants” who engage with social media in non-professional and non-commercial ways. They differ from UGC creators and influencers in that they do not monetise their online presence or produce content for financial gain. Rather, their use of Instagram is driven by four key personal and social motivations: information, entertainment, social interaction, and personal identity (Brandtzæg & Heim, 2009). Their participation can either be active (e.g., liking, commenting, posting, and messaging) or passive (e.g., browsing or viewing content without direct interaction) (Kaye, 2021). Accordingly, the findings are positioned from the perspectives of *general users* as the relevant social group (Pinch & Bijker, 1987), exploring how they accept, negotiate, or oppose (Hall, 1973) Instagram’s commercial logics—including algorithms, ads, UGC creators, and influencers—within the platform’s broader processes of commercialisation.

### 4.1 Interview Findings and Discussion

When asked to describe “Instagram” in three words (Question 1, Appendix C), participants overwhelmingly associated the platform with social and experiential qualities (Figure 10). Common terms like ‘Reels’, ‘Connection’, ‘Fun’, ‘Creative’, ‘Friends’, ‘Social’, and ‘Stories’ emphasise that users primarily view Instagram as a space for connection, enjoyment, and self-expression, rather than a commercial or transactional environment. The prominence of ‘Reels’ and ‘Stories’ suggests that participants frame the platform through its interactive and visual affordances, indicating engagement rooted in everyday participation over algorithmic or commercial motives. Likewise, descriptors such as ‘Fun’ and ‘Creative’ evoke Instagram’s emotional and inspirational appeal. At the same time, less frequent mentions like ‘Trend’, ‘Influencer’, ‘Useful’, and ‘Resources’ indicate that some participants also recognise Instagram’s functional and commercial aspects. These associations demonstrate an awareness of its position in promoting visibility, facilitating information-sharing, and supporting content creation. Although this outlook is less dominant, it acknowledges Instagram’s growing utility as a versatile tool. Together, these responses position Instagram as a hybrid space, shaped by the interplay between community-oriented practices and commercial logics.



**Figure 10.** Word Cloud of Participants’ Associations on Instagram

Despite the platform’s increasing integration of advertising, shopping, and influencer economies, participants’ perceptions remain anchored in Instagram’s social affordances and participatory culture. While they instinctively define the platform through its social and creative qualities, their later reflections reveal an awareness of its commercialisation. This tension illustrates how, even as users acknowledge the platform’s commercial logic, their fundamental understanding continues to prioritise its social character. In other words, Instagram’s identity as a “social” space endures both rhetorically and affectively, sustaining a sense of community even as it functions as a marketplace for branding and business. This duality forms the basis for the following thematic clusters, which explore how participants navigate and interpret Instagram’s evolving role in their daily lives—from early use to current engagement.

**From Spontaneity to Curation**

With Instagram’s evolution from a simple SNS centred on spontaneous sharing and connection to a platform embedded with commercial and content-driven tools, the first theme explores how users navigate tensions between authenticity, visibility, and connection in their posting practices. In its early years, Instagram enabled users to share only photos and apply basic filters (Change 1

in Table 1). Participants recalled how posting then felt effortless and genuine—a casual way to share personal moments without overthinking presentation. As Soph (Participant I) explained, “because you could just share *any* photo”, Instagram originally prioritised connection and the simple joy of sharing over performance and aesthetics.

Over time, however, the introduction of new features and the growing influence of UGC creators and influencers have reshaped these dynamics. The increasing focus on aesthetics, engagement, and algorithmic visibility has made posting more strategic and labour-intensive. As Soph further reflected:

“I’m not gonna lie, there’s that pressure for your feed to look a certain way. Nowadays, Instagram is *all about aesthetics*...if you just post a grainy photo or a blurry photo, you won’t get as much engagement.”

Her reflection captures a broader cultural shift—Instagram has indeed transformed from a space of spontaneous sharing into one ruled by norms of curation and visibility. While such pressures were once specific to UGC creators and influencers, many participants reported that these expectations now extend to general users. Even those with private accounts described a feeling of performative obligation to make their postings visually appealing to sustain engagement and remain visible among peers. Yet, this visibility is unevenly distributed. Participants also observed that static photo posts—once central to Instagram’s culture—have become less prominent as the platform’s algorithm now prioritises video-based content such as Reels (Change 28 in Table 1). Reels typically achieve far higher engagement and reach, with recent data showing that videos gain 125% more visibility than single-photo posts due to Instagram’s dedicated video feed (Lang, 2024). This shift discourages users who prefer sharing still images, as their posts now receive less exposure. Elle (Participant G), who once enjoyed sharing food and travel photos, expressed:

“I post, but not as often. And that’s mainly due to the fact that the algorithm has changed so much that even when I post, not everyone can see it—only a small percentage. And the more it doesn’t get noticed, the more it buries itself very deep. What I notice right now is people don’t just want pictures; they would like videos, stories, or reels, and then you

have to have music to accompany it—and for me, it’s not something I can do often...I feel it has become more *contrived*.”

This experience illustrates how algorithmic systems and shifting content norms have redefined what it means to be socially visible on Instagram. For many users, visibility has become a proxy for connection—the more engagement a post receives, the more “seen” and validated one feels within their social network. Posting has thus evolved from casual self-expression to a form of aesthetic and visibility labour, where users feel compelled to adapt to Instagram’s preferred formats to maintain both reach and social presence.

Rather than disengaging from Instagram entirely, participants adjusted their behaviour by posting less frequently while continuing to browse, interact, and communicate—reflecting Hall’s (1973) negotiated reading. Users do not passively absorb Instagram’s encoded ideologies of visibility and aesthetics; instead, they selectively “negotiate” them within the boundaries of their own values and everyday routines. By continuing to use the platform while modifying how and what they post, participants embody a negotiated position—accepting aspects of Instagram’s dominant logic (such as algorithmic visibility) while resisting others (such as the pressure to constantly perform). This tension reveals the complexity of user agency in a platformised nature, where individuals are both shaped by and shaping cultural meanings of Instagram.

This dynamic also aligns with SCOT’s interpretive flexibility, which posits that technologies do not possess fixed meanings but are continually reinterpreted by different social groups (Pinch & Bijker, 1987). Features such as Stories and Reels (Changes 10 and 28 in Table 1) were originally released by Instagram as competitive innovations (Constine, 2016; Silva, 2024); however, their meanings have evolved through user practices. For example, while Reels were not encoded with a specific purpose beyond offering another mode of content sharing and platform relevance, the rise of UGC creators and influencers has transformed them into strategic tools for aesthetic branding and visibility. According to Teleprompter.com (2025), around 59% of creator content now takes the form of Reels, illustrating how the feature’s social meaning has shifted towards performative, market-oriented expression. Yet, for general users, these same affordances are understood differently—as tools for casual storytelling or interpersonal engagement rather than

monetised exposure. Reels, therefore, exemplify how different social groups—UGC creators, influencers, and general users—assign different meanings around the same technological feature, reinforcing SCOT’s emphasis on the socially contingent nature of technology.

### Sustaining the Social Amid Commercialisation

As discussed in Chapter 2, Instagram’s founding vision was built on a “community first” ethos, where design and business decisions were guided by the goal of “preserving a good feeling when using Instagram” (Frier, 2020, p. 112) rather than prioritising rapid growth or profit. However, as the platform evolved, this ethos has been overshadowed by the platform’s commercial expansion. The introduction of tools for creators, brands, and businesses—such as ads, in-app shopping, broadcast channels, and Instagram Insights (Changes 5, 29, 37, and 53 in Table 1)—marks a significant reorientation towards monetisation and scalability.

When asked whether Instagram still fulfils its initial purpose of helping users socialise and stay connected with others (Question 6, Appendix C), participants offered mixed responses. Many recognised that the platform’s social purpose has evolved alongside its commercial ambitions. For some, this shift signified a departure from its founding intent, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

“I think the intent has changed. It’s been acquired by Facebook...and with marketplaces, the ability to buy even on Instagram; that did not happen when we first started” (Elle, Participant G).

“No, I don’t think that’s what it is anymore. It’s not really a socialising platform...I think people use it as a form of TV” (Luna, Participant H).

These perspectives illustrate a perceived reconfiguration of Instagram’s identity—from a space centred on interpersonal connection and community-building to one increasingly defined by commercial systems and content consumption. Algorithmic curation further intensifies this shift by promoting branded and shoppable content over personal sharing. However, six out of ten participants adopted a more adaptive stance. While they admitted Instagram’s commercialisation,

they regarded it as a “necessary” evolution and even “positive” development that broadens rather than erases the platform’s social purpose:

“I would say yes, but on top of the original purpose, they need to earn more money...they want to be more of a marketing tool, at the same time as a platform for people to connect and communicate. I mean, it still serves its purpose, but they are just *adding more value*” (Tay, Participant J).

Similarly, Abby (Participant A) perceived these developments as digital progress:

“I think because of the emerging world, it will happen eventually to every platform...I think everything has to be evolved for the better, but whatever the changes are, I hope it’s more positive than negative.”

These findings suggest that participants perceive Instagram’s commercial shift as a natural and expected progression, reflecting a broader cultural acceptance of the platform as both a social and economic space. For many, commercialisation does not necessarily undermine authenticity but rather signifies adaptation to the ever-changing dynamics of digital culture. In this sense, social interaction and commercial participation have become deeply intertwined, illustrating how users have internalised hybrid forms of sociality in which personal connection, community, and commerce operate in tandem.

This response pattern aligns with what Hall (1973) describes as a negotiated reading—a middle ground between dominant acceptance and outright opposition. While participants recognised the commercial logic encoded into Instagram’s design—its emphasis on monetisation, engagement, and brand integration—they reinterpreted these changes through their own “frameworks of knowledge” (Hall, 1973, p. 165). In doing so, they accepted the “dominant code” that platforms must evolve to remain relevant but resisted the notion that such evolution diminishes social connection. Instead, users re-signified commercialisation as “enhancement”, reading Instagram’s dual identity (social and commercial) as a natural stage in its development rather than a loss of authenticity.

This adaptive negotiation mirrors the closure and stabilisation phase in the SCOT framework. As Pinch and Bijker (1987) argue, closure occurs when competing interpretations of a technology merge into a relatively “stable” understanding shared across social groups. In Instagram’s case, the earlier tension between its social and commercial identities appears to have reached a process of closure by the redefinition of the problem: users now view these two logics as interdependent rather than oppositional. The platform’s hybrid identity—where social interaction, visibility, and commerce coexist—has therefore “stabilised” through collective user acceptance and no longer presents a major point of contention. However, this closure remains contingent rather than final. Participants’ continued ambivalence—expressed in keywords of “evolution” and “adding more value”—indicates that this stability depends on ongoing negotiation between user expectations and platform developments.

### Personalised Discovery and the Fragmented Feed

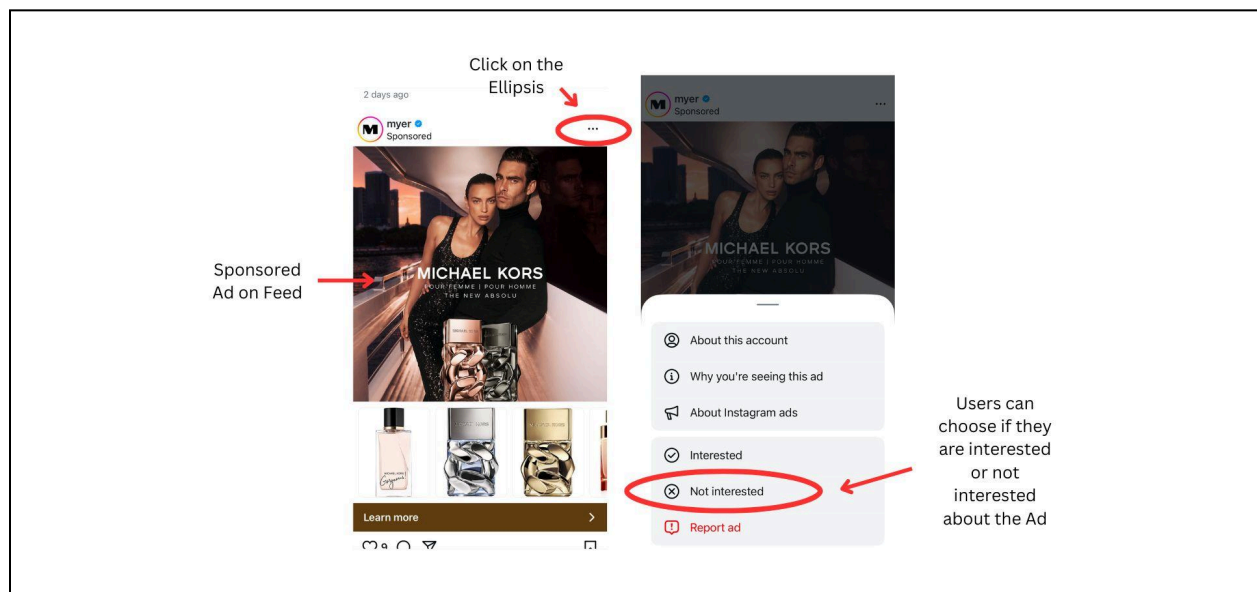
This intertwining of social and commercial activity also extends to how content is encountered on Instagram—introducing the third theme: users’ experiences of the algorithmic feed. Since the platform’s shift from a chronological to a personalised, engagement-based timeline (Change 12 in Table 1), content visibility has been determined less by users’ chosen followings and more by algorithmic logic. Participants expressed that this change has altered how they interact and stay connected with others, with many noting it is now “harder to see my friends’ posts” (Dana, Participant F). This disconnection was further echoed by Alex (Participant D), who explained:

“Things definitely get *buried*, because it’s just so much content. I’ve found multiple cases where a friend of mine has posted something, and I’ll be like, Oh, I didn’t even know you posted it, because that content got buried amongst all the influencer accounts or meme accounts, or whatever.”

Experiences like these expose how algorithmic curation has reshaped the social rhythms of the platform. Whereas the chronological feed once enabled users to feel directly connected to their followings, the algorithmic system now mediates visibility through engagement metrics and predictive relevance. Posts are ranked according to user activity—such as likes, searches, and time spent viewing content (Mosseri, 2021)—and are integrated with monetisable elements like

ads. As Elle (Participant G) observed, “Just because I clicked on one or two creators and viewed Vic’s meat products, suddenly the algorithm thought that I was interested in that”.

Many participants expressed frustration towards the frequency of ads interrupting their browsing experience, describing them as “annoying” and “not enjoyable”. Ads were said to appear “every few posts”, backing the perception that the algorithm prioritises monetisable and recommended content—such as sponsored posts—over interpersonal sharing. A short feed test supported this view, with participants’ first four posts typically following this pattern: Following’s post → Suggested post → Ad → Suggested Reel. This structure emphasises how content from users’ followings becomes “buried” beneath UGC creators, influencers, ads, and algorithmically promoted material. To manage this experience, users employed strategies like “scrolling away” or using the “not interested” feature (Figure 11) to filter unwanted content.

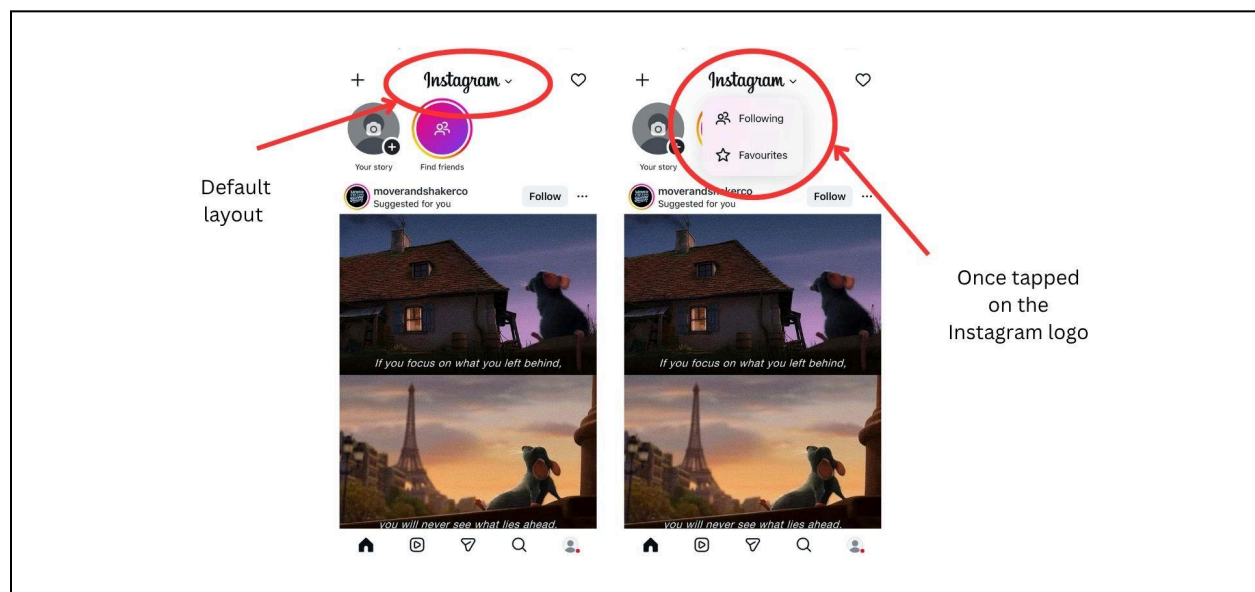


**Figure 11.** Instagram’s Feedback Mechanism on Ads

While most participants viewed the algorithm as intrusive, a smaller group considered it more favourably. For instance, Luna (Participant H) reflected that under the chronological timeline, the “scope was limited”, appreciating how the new feed surfaces content aligned with her interests. For these users, algorithmic curation enhances rather than disrupts their experience, facilitating

personalised discovery. This duality reflects Instagram’s “hyper-personalisation” (Jain et al., 2021)—a system that constrains and improves user experience by tailoring content to individual preferences while reinforcing engagement patterns.

Despite these mixed viewpoints, Instagram’s attempts to restore user control through the 2022 reintroduction of chronological feed options remain largely unnoticed. Many participants were unaware of the Favourites and Following tab (Change 32 in Table 1), which Alex (Participant D) described as “hidden away in the Instagram logo” (Figure 12)—accessible only by tapping the icon at the top of the home screen. This lack of awareness emphasises how platform design structures user agency: while Instagram appears to offer autonomy, the feature’s low visibility subtly directs users back to the algorithmic default, reaffirming Instagram’s “power” over how content is encountered and consumed.



**Figure 12.** Instagram’s Favourites and Following Tab

These findings exemplify Hall’s (1973) E/D model, particularly the tension between dominant and negotiated readings. Instagram encodes its algorithmic feed with a dominant ideology of efficiency, personalisation, and engagement optimisation (Mosseri, 2021; Boyaci, 2025). General users, however, decode this logic in diverse ways—some align with the dominant code by

embracing personalised discovery, while others adopt negotiated or oppositional positions by expressing frustration or using avoidance tactics. This diversity illustrates that user engagement is not passive consumption but an active interpretation process shaped by personal expectations, social norms, and the desire for a meaningful connection within a commercialised environment.

Simultaneously, these responses, once again, exhibit SCOT's interpretive flexibility (Pinch & Bijker, 1987). The algorithmic feed does not hold a single, fixed meaning; rather, it acquires multiple coexisting interpretations depending on the relevant social group involved. For creators, it is a tool for strategic visibility and monetisation; for general users, it can be either a source of connection or detachment; and for the platform itself, it operates as a mechanism of profit and optimisation. These competing meanings imply that technological artifacts—such as Instagram's algorithm—are socially contingent rather than technologically determined.

Participants' experiences further reveal how user agency operates within structural constraints. While the algorithm encodes commercial imperatives that shape what users see and how they interact, users continue to renegotiate their relationship with it—by filtering unwanted content, redefining what discovery means, or resisting algorithmic prompts. As AL (Participant C) noted:

“I still feel somewhat empowered as a consumer, but I am also able to say things like, This ad is not relevant...I think it's *up to the user* to define their algorithm.”

This sentiment encapsulates the convergence of both the SCOT and E/D frameworks: users are not powerless within technological systems but “actively participate” in shaping how algorithmic technologies are lived, understood, and made meaningful in everyday contexts.

### Staying Connected in a Changing Platform

As Instagram's design increasingly caters to creators, brands, and commercial activity, its role as a social space continues to evolve. The fourth theme investigates how users adapt their social practices to remain engaged and connected within this shifting landscape. Participants described relying on a range of features—such as DMs, story reactions (liking and commenting), Story Highlights, Polls, Reels, Close Friends, Reposting, and Public Collections (Changes 3, 18, 23,

25, 28, 34, 40, and 52)—to maintain interpersonal relationships on the platform. Most agreed that these additions have “made it easier” to connect, as they allow for greater personalisation and flexibility in how users interact and express themselves. Rather than relying solely on DMs, participants highlighted that sharing or reacting to Reels and Stories helps cultivate moments of shared humour, mutual interest, and emotional closeness. The Close Friends feature (Change 25 in Table 1) was particularly valued for its selective visibility, allowing users to share more personal updates within smaller circles. As Soph (Participant I) ascribed:

“It’s nice if you want to share small life changes or life events with your personal friends. You’ll get more engagement from the people you know through that, as compared to posting on your feed or to everyone.”

These examples illuminate how users navigate Instagram’s increasingly public and commercial environment by creating “micro-communities”—private spheres that facilitate closeness, genuine interaction, community, and a sense of belonging (Romero, 2024). In doing so, users reconfigure Instagram’s affordances to align with their social values, reclaiming control over visibility and privacy even as the platform becomes more commercialised.

Beyond Instagram, participants also discussed maintaining personal connections through other SNSs, most commonly Facebook, WhatsApp, and Little Red Note (XiaoHongShu). Although Facebook and WhatsApp were mainly used for messaging, Elle (Participant G) described Little Red Note as a more authentic and less commercialised option—one with fewer ads, fewer brand collaborations, and a more genuine portrayal of everyday life. Nevertheless, the majority of participants still chose Instagram as their preferred platform due to its visual-centric design, multifunctionality, and ubiquity among peers. As AL (Participant C) commented, “It’s a very all-in-one platform”, while Cal (Participant E) similarly reflected that “you can do everything seamlessly on Instagram without interruption”.

These findings illustrate SCOT’s multidirectional model of the “variation and selection” mechanism (Pinch & Bijker, 1987), in which different technological options coexist, and users selectively adopt those that best meet their communicative and social needs. While this concept

traditionally describes how different versions or components of a technology evolve through iterative design (Pinch & Bijker, 1987), it can similarly be applied to users' platform choices. For instance, the introduction of Close Friends in 2018 represents the platform's adaptive response to user-driven selection pressures—a design variation that accommodates demands for more private and controlled sharing within a single account. Conversely, users seeking greater autonomy and less commercial influence gravitate towards alternative SNSs like Little Red Note, which they perceive as more genuine and less commodified. This dynamic shows how users continuously navigate between variation (different platforms and features) and selection (choosing Instagram despite its commercial orientation), reinforcing how technological evolution and user agency are mutually constitutive.

From Hall's (1973) perspective, these behaviours also exemplify a negotiated position, in which users partially accept but simultaneously reinterpret Instagram's encoded meanings. While the platform ingrains commercial values—encouraging participation through engagement, visibility, and content creation—participants do not simply reproduce these logics. Instead, they actively “negotiate” with the platform to preserve a sense of personal connection. Rather than embracing Instagram's creator-oriented environment, users appropriate its affordances for interpersonal and relational purposes, using features like Close Friends (Change 25 in Table 1) to sustain everyday communication and intimacy. As a result, they resist total commercial assimilation by redefining what “connection” means on their own terms. This demonstrates the active, interpretive agency central to Hall's (1973) E/D model.

### Adapting and Negotiating with Instagram

Across the four themes, participants' experiences reveal that Instagram's technological evolution is not a linear or top-down process dictated solely by design or commercial intent but a socially shaped and continuously negotiated phenomenon. The findings show no singular or uniform overarching response to the platform's expansion; rather, users adopt a nuanced stance—one of *partial acceptance and adaptation*—that reflects Hall's (1973) concept of the negotiated reading. Participants neither fully accepted nor rejected Instagram's encoded meanings but actively reinterpreted and reconfigured them within the routines of their everyday use. This ambivalence embodies Hall's (1973) argument that audiences rarely adopt purely dominant or oppositional

positions; instead, they continuously negotiate meaning within the interplay between structural constraints—such as algorithmic visibility, aesthetic pressure, or commercial saturation—and individual agency, expressed through selective participation, adaptation, and subtle resistance.

In tandem, these findings resonate strongly with SCOT's principle of interpretive flexibility, which emphasises that technologies acquire different meanings across different social groups (Pinch & Bijker, 1987). Instagram's features—such as the algorithmic feed and Reels—thus acquire multiple and sometimes competing interpretations depending on the user. As discussed, while creators perceive Reels as a tool for strategic visibility and monetisation, general users appropriate the same feature for connection or casual storytelling. This multiplicity of meanings demonstrates that Instagram's technological design is not simply received as intended but is socially redefined through users' practices, reinforcing SCOT's multidirectional understanding of technological development (Pinch & Bijker, 1987).

At a broader level, participants recognised Instagram's "hegemonic" ideology—its commercial imperative to retain users within an integrated, monetised ecosystem. Yet, rather than rejecting this system outright (e.g., deleting Instagram), users negotiated with it pragmatically, valuing Instagram's convenience, social reach, and creative flexibility. Their continued engagement, even while expressing awareness of its commercialisation, mirrors a lived "contradiction" (Hall, 1973): users operate as both agents of resistance and subjects of ideology. As Alex (Participant D) remarked, "It's tough, because there are pros and cons with both [old and new versions of Instagram]". This evidently highlights that users find themselves negotiating between nostalgia for a simpler, community-oriented platform and appreciation for the creative and functional possibilities afforded by new, commercially driven features.

Although this study initially hypothesised that Instagram's commercialisation would diminish social interaction, the findings instead indicate a more complex reality. Users continue to find meaning, joy, and connection within the very structures that commercialise their activity. This paradox underscores the coexistence of sociality and commodification—where the mechanisms that drive profit also enable personal expression and relational connection. Ultimately, Instagram encapsulates the broader condition of contemporary digital culture: a space where technological

design, user agency, and capitalist imperatives converge, producing a dynamic and continually negotiated relationship between connection, visibility, and value.

Crucially, this raises a central question: *in a platform increasingly structured around commercial objectives, is genuine social engagement still possible?* According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2025), “genuine” refers to something that is “real and exactly what it appears to be”—that is, authentic. While the findings indicate that genuine social engagement does persist on Instagram, the very nature of “genuineness” must be reconsidered. In a digital environment governed by algorithmic curation and monetised attention, authenticity no longer exists outside these systems but operates within them. Users now build and perform authenticity through features designed to optimise engagement, suggesting that “real” connection has evolved alongside the commercial logics that shape it. This tension extends beyond Instagram to the wider SNS landscape, where the boundaries between connection and commerce, participation and performance, have become increasingly porous. Social interaction today unfolds in spaces where visibility, self-expression, and monetisation intersect—revealing that digital authenticity is not the absence of mediation but the product of constant negotiation between self-presentation and platform design. Therefore, the negotiation observed among Instagram users reflects not just a platform-specific adaptation but a broader cultural condition of 21st-century digital life: one in which being genuine is less about resisting commodification and more about finding authenticity *within* it.

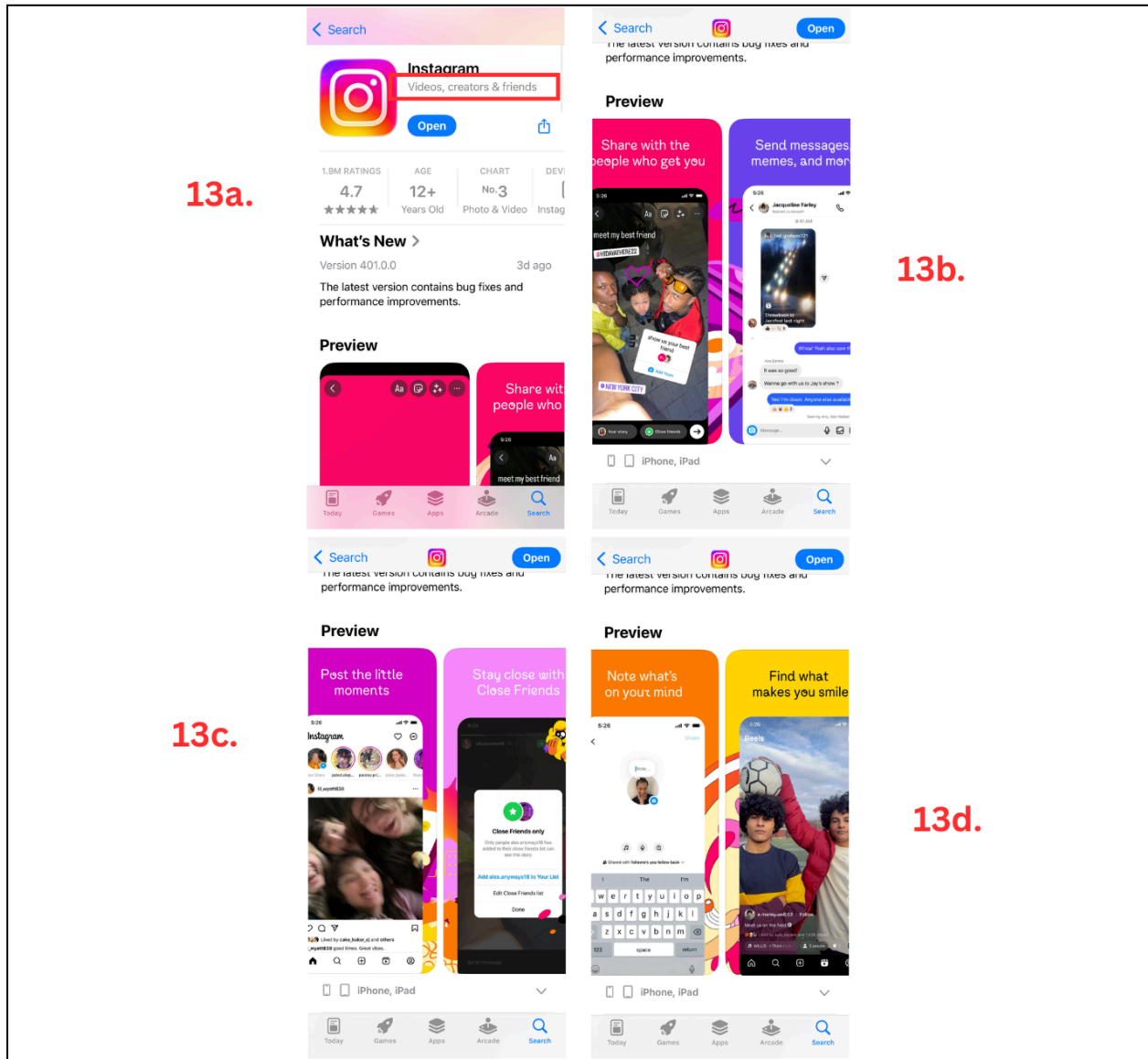
#### **4.2 A Technical Walkthrough on Instagram**

Before analysing Instagram’s interface, it is essential to first consider how the platform presents and brands itself. Accordingly, this section begins by examining Instagram’s presentation on the Apple App Store before turning to Light et al.’s (2018) framework of the three stages of app use and the “environment of expected use”, as outlined in Chapter 3.

##### **Instagram on the Apple App Store**

As illustrated in Figure 13a, Instagram markets itself as both a social and commercial platform. Under its title, the description highlights “videos, creators, and friends”, encapsulating its hybrid identity that combines interpersonal connection with content creation and creator culture. The preview images further reinforce this duality through bright visuals and captions such as “Share

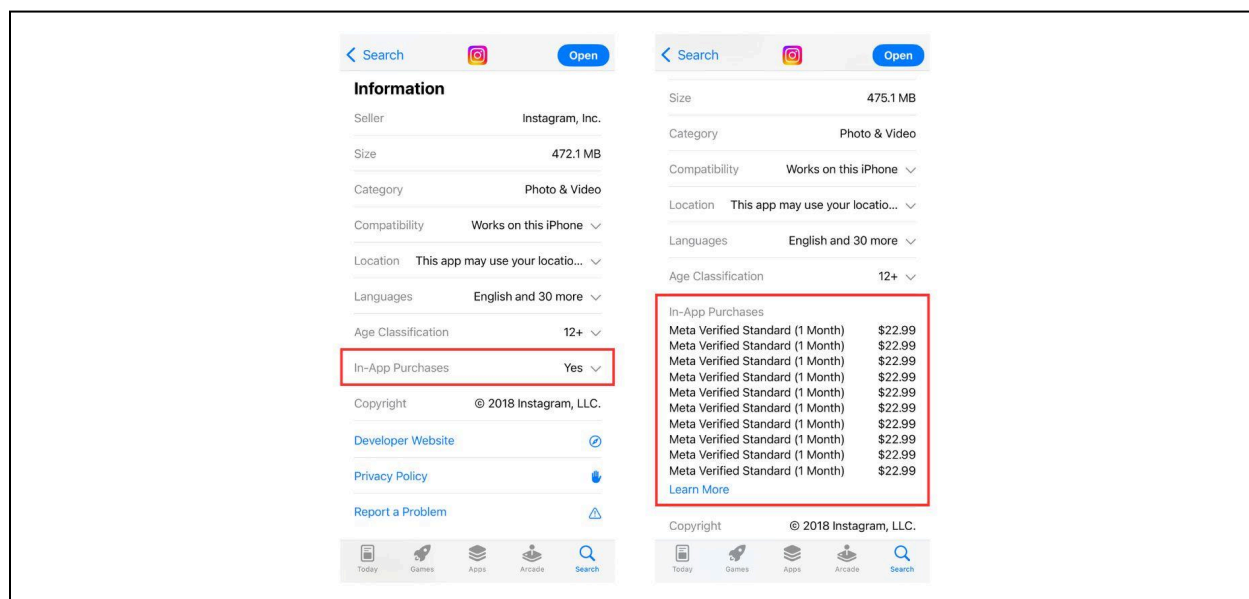
with the people who get you”, “Stay close with Close Friends”, and “Note what’s on your mind” (Figure 13b-d). These phrases evoke intimacy, authenticity, and emotional resonance—values that appeal to users’ desire for belonging and interpersonal connection—while simultaneously promoting engagement with the platform’s affordances.



**Figure 13.** Instagram Preview on the Apple App Store

However, scrolling down to Instagram’s “Information” section reveals its underlying commercial infrastructure (Figure 14). Here, “in-app purchases” are explicitly listed, with the only option

being “Meta Verified Standard (1 Month)” for \$22.99. This highlights Instagram’s monetisation model, demonstrating how commercial features are embedded within a platform that outwardly markets itself as socially oriented. While the app’s previews emphasise authenticity, creativity, and connection, the inclusion of paid verification exposes its deeper alignment with Meta’s profit-driven ecosystem. This juxtaposition reveals the coexistence of sociality and commerce at the heart of Instagram’s design—an interplay subtly concealed unless users deliberately scroll down, suggesting how commerciality is obscured beneath the veneer of social connection and community.

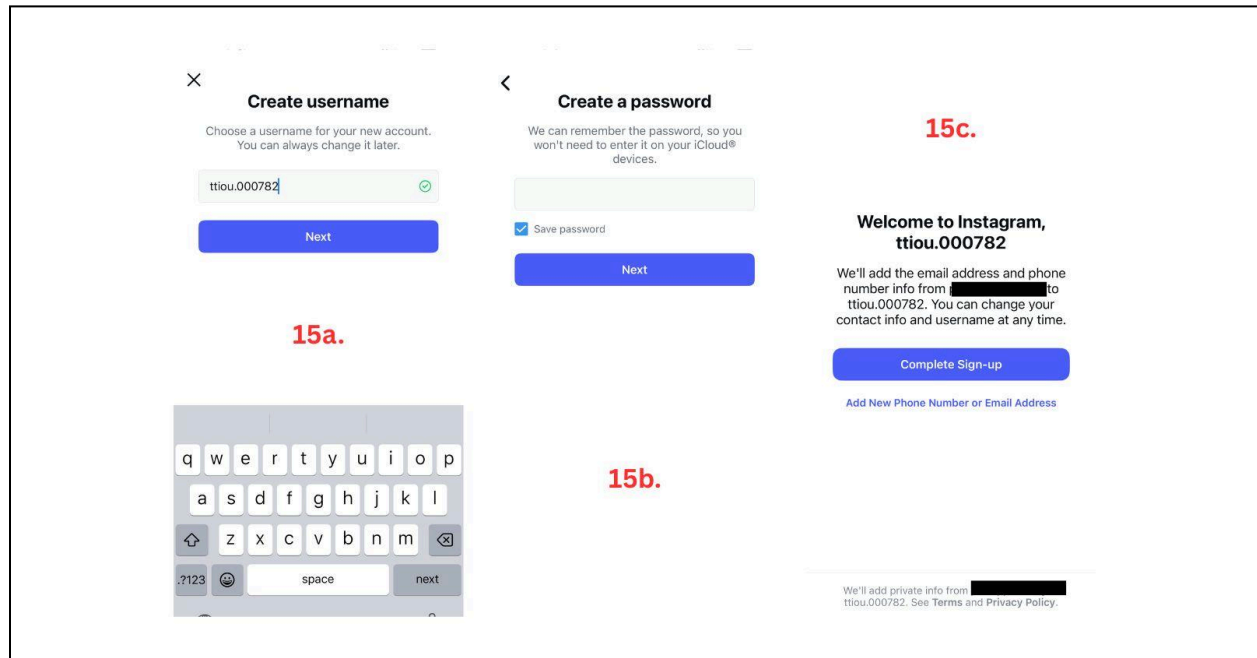


**Figure 14.** Instagram’s Information List and In-App Purchases

### Registering an Account

To access Instagram, every user must first register an account through a guided process. This begins with creating a username, setting a password, and providing contact information such as an email address or phone number (Figure 15a-b). As I already had existing accounts linked to Meta, Instagram automatically synced my saved contact details to the new account (Figure 15c). Introduced in 2020—and absent in earlier versions—this function reflects Instagram’s deepening integration within Meta’s interconnected ecosystem. By minimising friction and streamlining onboarding through convenience and familiarity, Instagram reinforces Meta’s broader strategy of

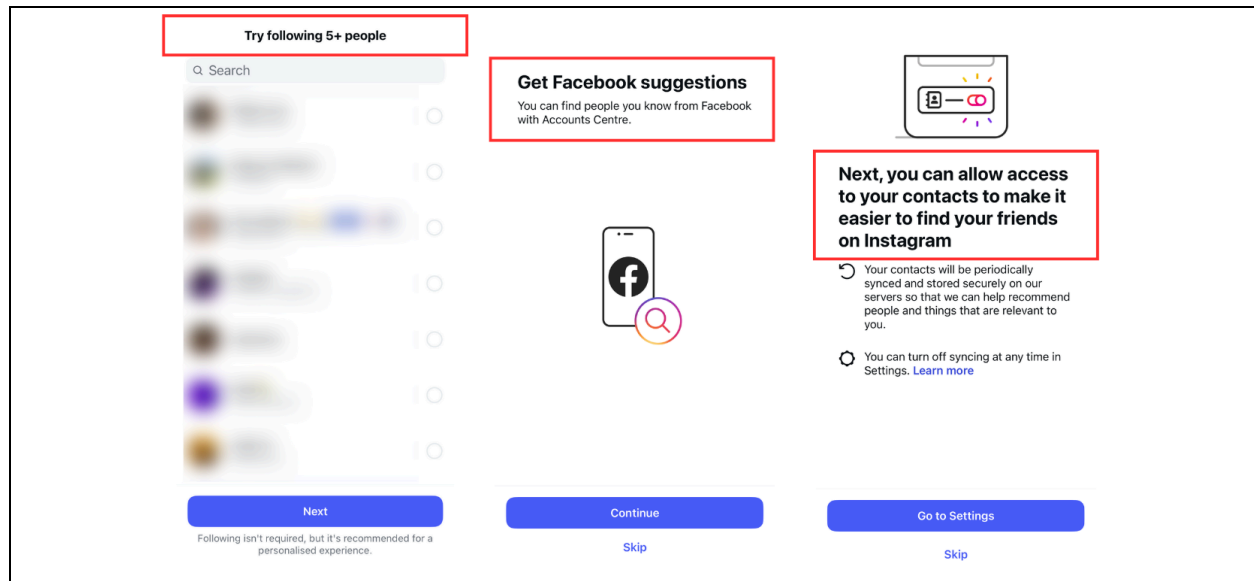
ecosystemic integration, ensuring users remain connected across its suite of platforms, including Facebook and WhatsApp (Cheimbi, 2023).



**Figure 15.** Registering an Account on Instagram

This seamless registration process encodes an ideology of connectivity and accessibility. By presenting onboarding as effortless, Instagram subtly normalises cross-platform data linkage and positions integration within the “Meta ecosystem” as beneficial (Cheimbi, 2023). What appears as convenience, therefore, also functions as a means of infrastructural dependence—illustrating how design operates as a user benefit and a mechanism of “platform governance” (Light et al., 2018). Through this, Instagram embeds norms of data sharing and constant connectivity into the user experience, shaping participation as both voluntary and structurally guided.

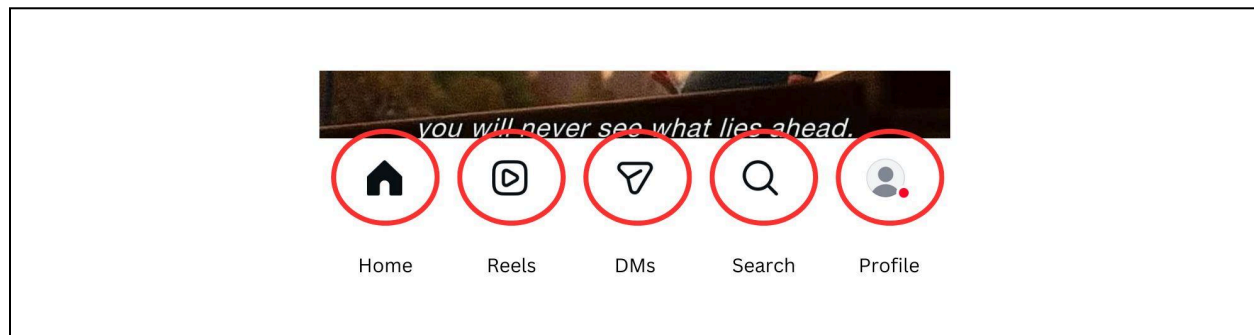
Further strengthening this ideology, after setup, Instagram prompts users to “follow 5+ people”, “get Facebook suggestions”, and “allow access to your contacts” (Figure 16). These actions collectively signal Instagram’s strategy of cross-platform synchronisation and social expansion. The onboarding process thus immediately entrenches users within a pre-existing networked environment, fostering relational connectivity before any direct interaction even occurs.



**Figure 16.** Instagram’s Prompts to Follow People

#### 4.2.1 Key Features

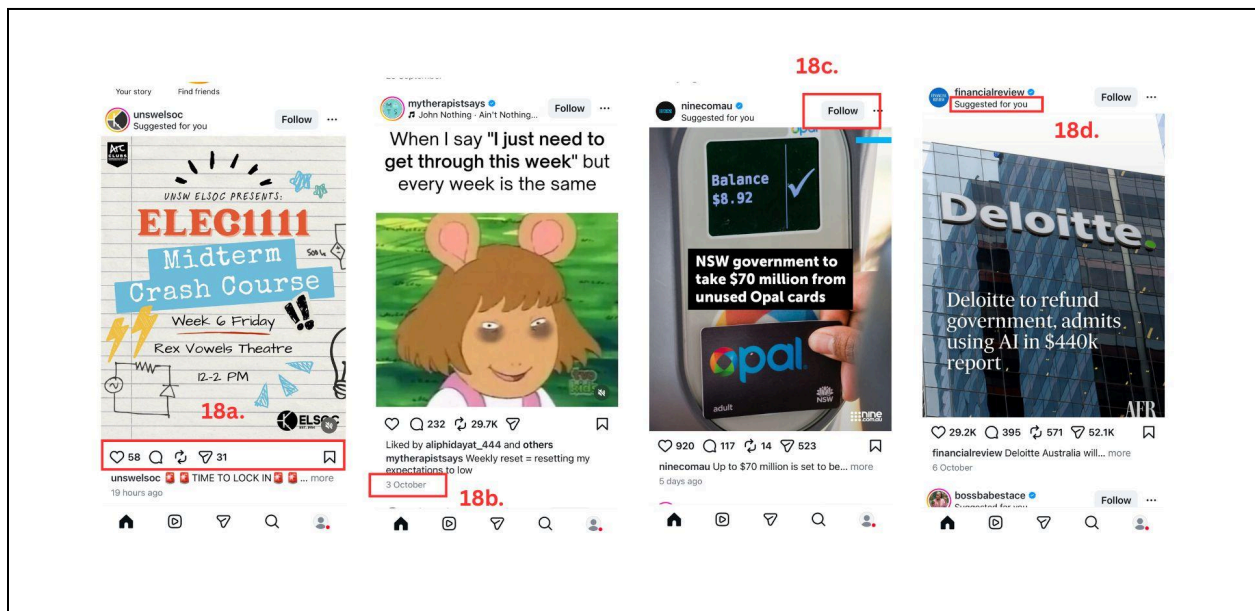
Instagram’s interface consists of five main sections along the bottom navigation bar—the Home, Reels, DMs, Search, and Profile pages (Figure 17). These represent Instagram’s core functions: viewing content, discovering new content, watching Reels, messaging others, and curating one’s online identity. The subsequent section analyses the navigation of the Home and Reels pages, alongside Instagram’s commercial features, such as the Shop tab and professional dashboard, to show how Instagram structures user interaction while embedding commercialisation within its interface design.



**Figure 17.** Instagram’s Navigation Bar

## Home Page

As depicted in Figure 18, the home page functions as the primary landing interface, displaying a curated feed of photos, videos, ads, and suggested content. Users can engage with these posts through likes, comments, reposts, saves, and shares (Meta, 2025g). Since no accounts were followed, the feed consisted entirely of recommended content rather than posts from followings. At this stage, no ads appeared, as Instagram had not yet gathered sufficient behavioural data to deliver targeted promotions. Nevertheless, the feed still reflected my prior engagement patterns from other linked Meta accounts (e.g., my personal Instagram profile), indicating Instagram’s use of cross-account data integration and algorithmic personalisation that extends beyond a single account.



**Figure 18.** Instagram’s Home Feed Observation

The first posts shown included a UNSW society, a meme account, Australian news, and a post from the Financial Review—illustrating how the algorithm prioritises familiar and contextually relevant content to create a sense of personal relevance. As the account was accessed from Australia, the feed was further localised, tailoring recommendations to my geographical location. The “Follow” and “Suggested for you” (Figures 18c-d) labels atop each post confirmed that none of these accounts were followed, marking them as algorithmic recommendations. Each post’s

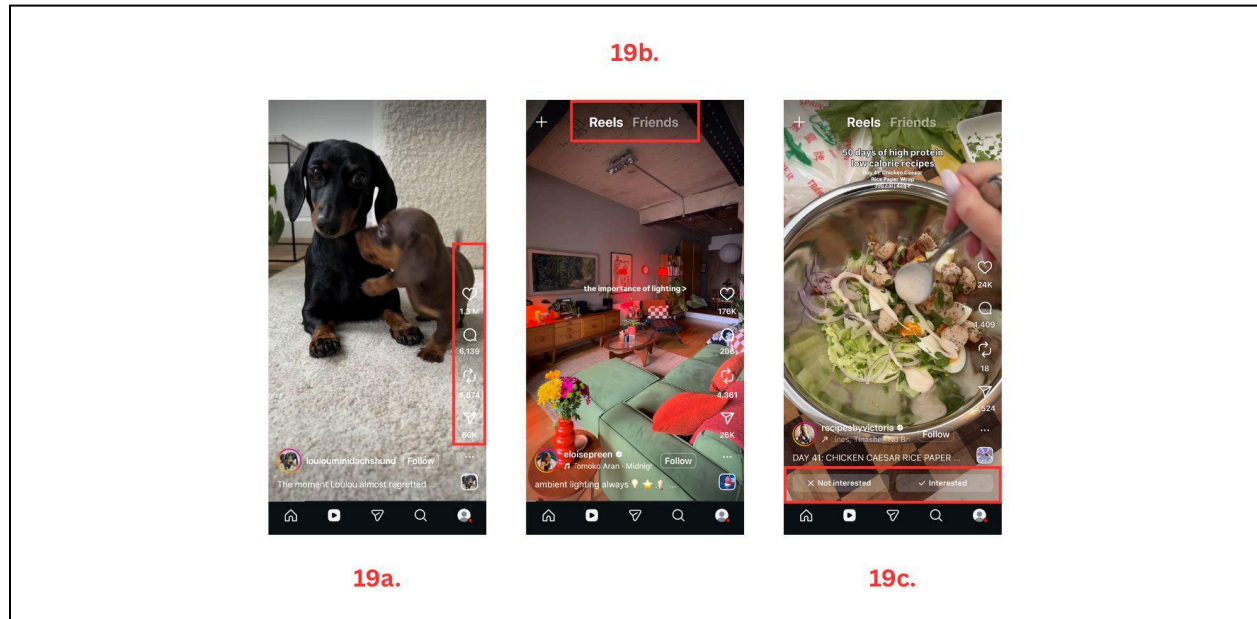
timestamp varied irregularly—from “19 hours ago” to “6 October” (Figure 18b)—revealing the feed’s non-chronological, engagement-driven logic.

This mirrors Bucher’s (2012) notion of “calculated algorithmic visibility”, where algorithmic systems rank content not by recency but by its potential to generate interaction. The origins of this logic can be traced to Facebook’s “EdgeRank” algorithm, which determined post visibility based on three factors: affinity (the relationship between user and creator), weight (the type of content), and time decay (its recency) (Bucher, 2012). Although Facebook replaced EdgeRank in 2011 with more advanced, machine-learning-based systems, the same underlying principles now govern Instagram’s algorithm feed. In this sense, Instagram’s “personalisation” operates through continuous data collection that reinforces the platform’s control over user behaviour and visibility (Gillespie, 2013). As Gillespie (2013) asserts, users are “encouraged to volunteer all sorts of information about themselves and encouraged to feel powerful doing so” (p. 8). This exposes how personalisation acts as a form of empowerment and as a mechanism of platform governance (Light et al., 2018), where the guise of convenience and relevance conceals deeper systems of surveillance and data extraction.

### Reels Page

Similarly, Reels (Change 28 in Table 1) serves as Instagram’s secondary home page dedicated exclusively to short-form video content and offering a continuous, vertically scrolling feed distinct from the main timeline. Users can engage through likes, comments, reposts, shares, and saves (the latter accessible via the three-dot menu beneath the share icon) (Figure 19a). The recently introduced “Friends” feature (Change 51 in Table 1), located beside the “Reels” tab, allows users to view public content that their friends have interacted with (Pokrop, 2025) (Figure 19b). This addition reflects Instagram’s ongoing effort to cultivate a sense of community and relational engagement within an increasingly commercialised platform. Users can also indicate whether they are “interested” or “not interested” in specific Reels (Figure 19c), enabling the algorithm to further personalise their feed. This highlights Instagram’s reliance on participatory feedback loops to refine recommendations and sustain engagement. Such mechanisms resonate with SCOT’s multidirectional model, specifically its notion of “variation and selection”, where technological growth evolves through user feedback and adaptation (Pinch & Bijker, 1987).

Here, Instagram’s algorithm acts as a dynamic feedback system, experimenting with “variations” in content exposure and “selecting” those that align with user preferences, thereby tailoring individual experiences while reinforcing the platform’s logic of personalisation and optimisation.

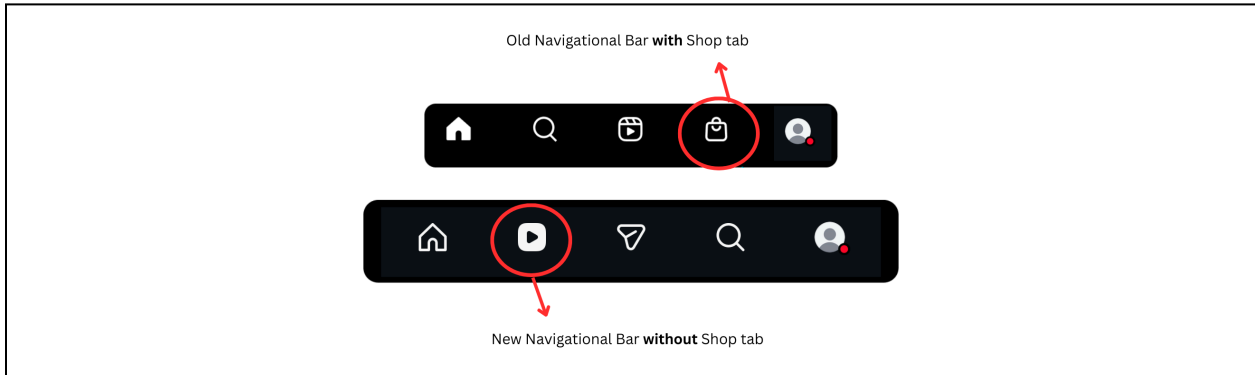


**Figure 19.** Instagram’s Reel Page

### Shop Tab

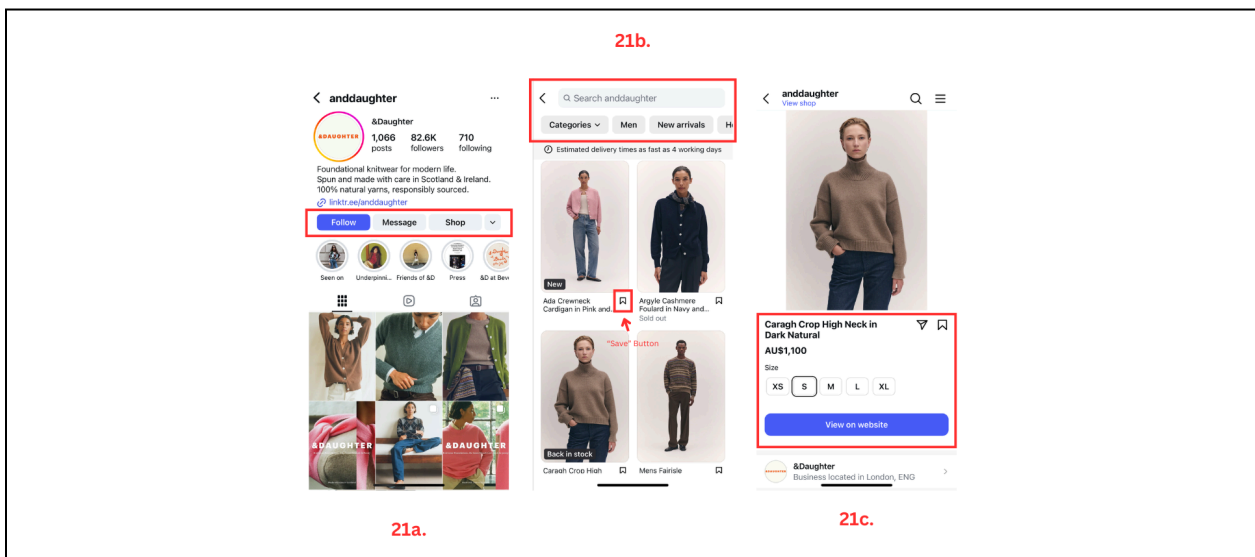
Instagram previously featured a dedicated “Shop” tab on its navigational bar; however, this was removed in February 2023 as part of a major interface update that repositioned the “Reels” button to the second position of the bar (Figure 20). Although the standalone Shop tab was removed, shopping functions remain embedded across the platform—appearing within the Explore page, Home feed, Reels, Stories, and ads (Tribe, 2025). This integration creates a more seamless browsing experience, where commerce is subtly interwoven into everyday use. Rather than directing users to a distinct shopping space, Instagram now promotes purchasing options within ordinary engagement flows, normalising commercial activity as part of social interaction. As Instagram (2025) stated, this redesign aimed to “simplify” the user experience and make it “easier for users to connect with friends and interests”. Yet, this shift also represents a strategic rebranding—from overt commercialisation, which previously attracted user criticism, to a more integrated and “invisible” form of platform capitalism. In this new model, social connection and

consumption coexist fluidly within the same interface, reinforcing Instagram’s dual identity as both a social and commercial ecosystem.



**Figure 20.** Instagram’s Old vs New Navigational Bar

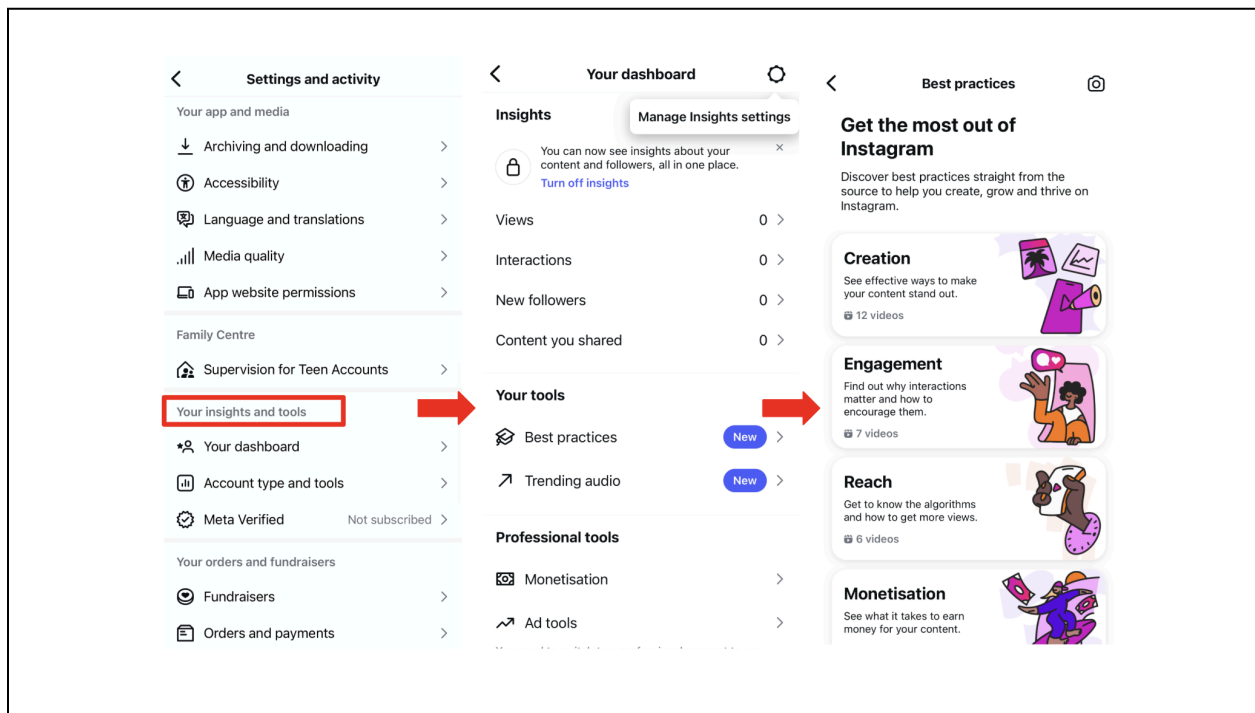
Using the brand @anddaughter as an example, the “Shop” tab is positioned beside the “Follow” and “Message” buttons (Figure 21a). Once clicked, it directs users to a feed of product listings, where items can be browsed by category (e.g., men, new arrivals), searched via keywords, or saved for later (Figure 21b). When a user clicks on a product, further details—such as price, size options, and an external link to the brand’s website—become available (Figure 21c).



**Figure 21.** Instagram’s “Shop” Tab

## Professional Dashboard

The professional dashboard operates as a centralised hub where users can track performance metrics, access professional tools, and explore educational resources curated by Instagram. It is available only to professional accounts, such as creators or businesses, to use this feature (Meta, 2025h). However, upon examining the “Settings and Activity” page, Instagram provides various options related to account management, visibility, insights, and Meta-linked tools. Interestingly, while my personal private account does not display the “Your Insights and Tools” option, the public account @ttoiu.000782 does (Figure 22)—despite not being switched to a professional profile.

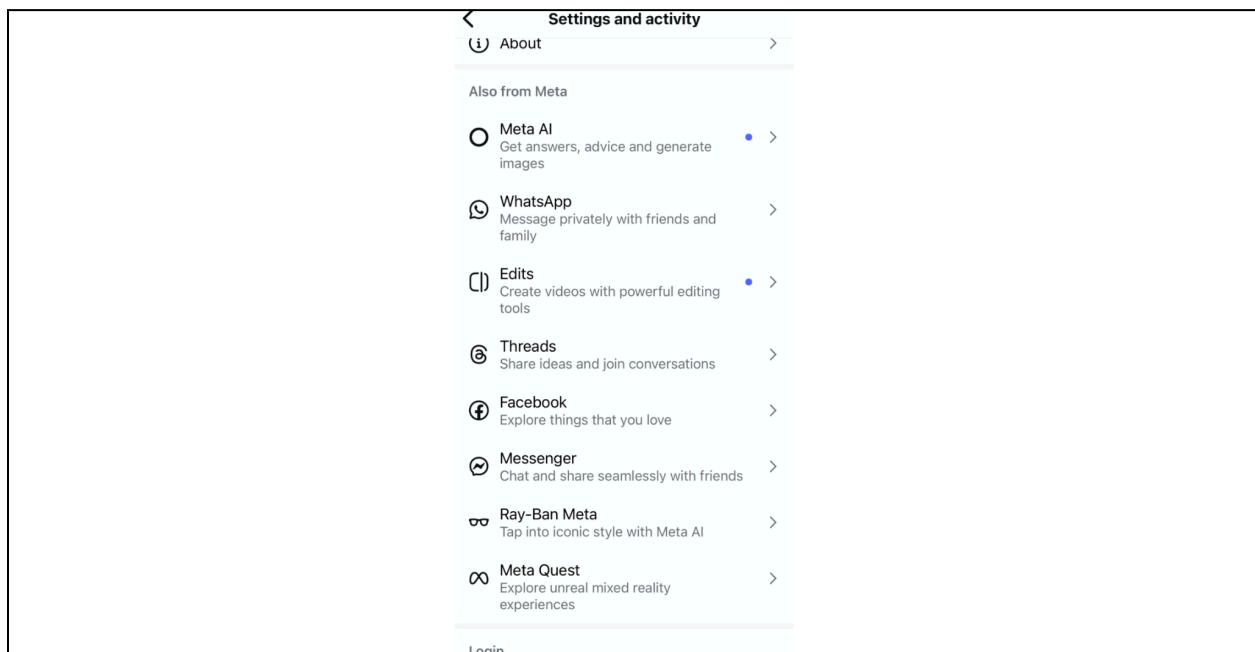


**Figure 22.** Instagram’s Professional Dashboard Menu

This observation suggests that Instagram automatically enables partial access to analytics for public accounts by default, effectively blurring the distinction between personal and professional use. The dashboard also presents a “Best Practices” section, offering resources on how to create, engage, reach, and monetise content—positioning all users as potential creators. By providing a preview of creator-oriented insights, Instagram gently nudges general users towards adopting a

professionalised mode of participation. This behaviour is echoed in interview data, where Alex (Participant D)—a general user—explained that he switched to a professional account “purely just to see the analytics”, noting his curiosity about which posts received more attention. In this sense, Instagram standardises self-tracking and performance monitoring as desirable and even expected forms of participation, fostering what Duffy (2016) describes as “aspirational labour”, where users internalise commercial metrics as markers of social value.

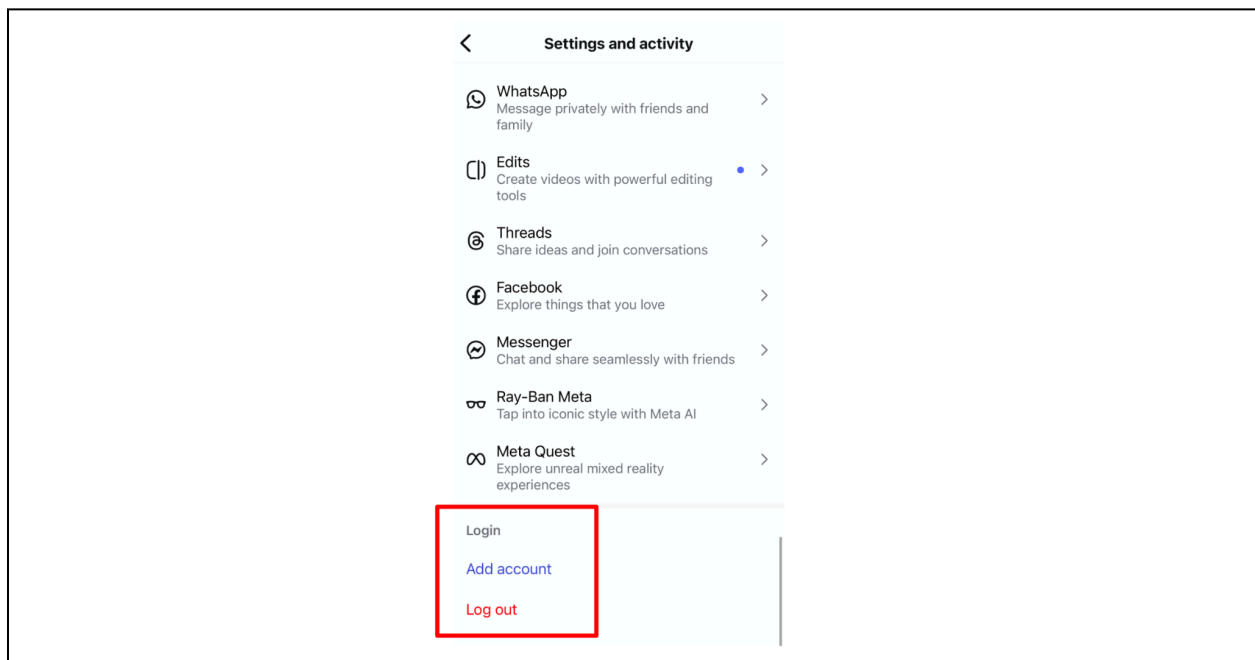
Importantly, at the bottom of the “Settings and Activity” menu, Instagram displays a list of all tools and platforms under Meta (Figure 23), reinforcing its role as an integrated and versatile hub for content creation, communication, and management. This also highlights how much Instagram has evolved—from its early days as a standalone photo-sharing app to becoming part of Meta’s interconnected network. Following its acquisition, Instagram is now linked with two of the largest SNSs, Facebook and WhatsApp, while also promoting Meta’s own applications such as Threads and Edits (Changes 39 and 46 in Table 1). This expansion underscores Meta’s strategy of ecosystemic consolidation, where each platform fortifies the other’s functionality, encouraging users to remain within a unified digital environment rather than seeking alternatives.



**Figure 23.** Instagram’s Cross-convergence with Other Platforms and Tools

## Logging Out and Leaving Instagram

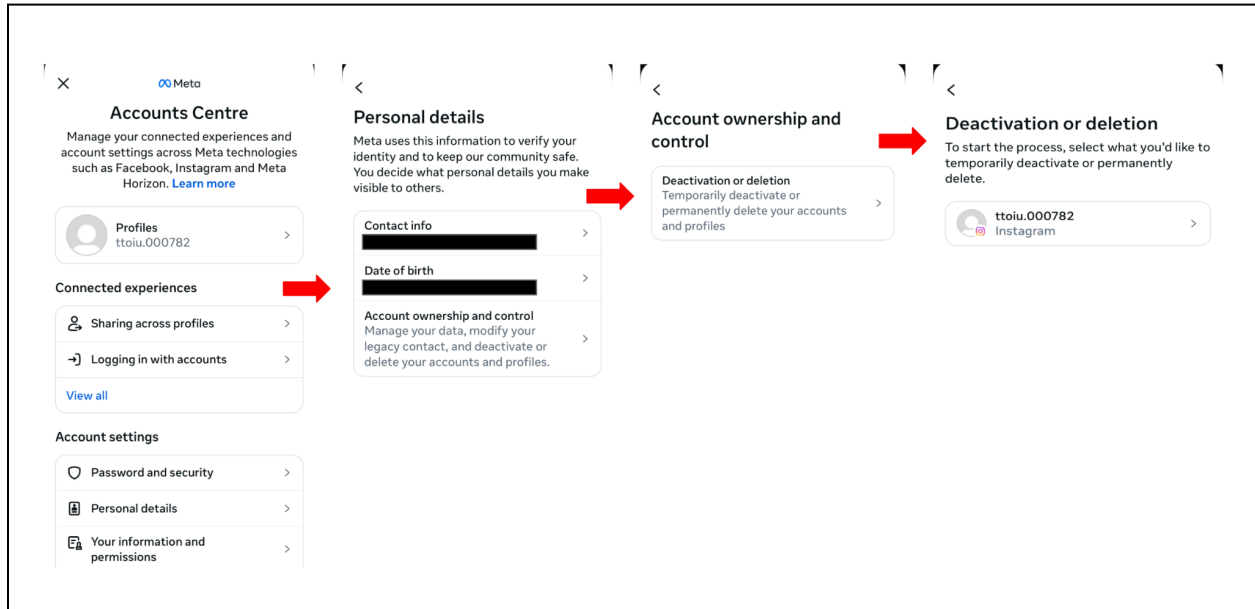
Moving on to the final stage of app use, deleting an Instagram account proved to be a difficult process—especially when compared to the ease of creating one, as discussed earlier. While users might expect deletion to be straightforward, there is no visible “Delete” option within the “Settings and Activity” page; instead, the only immediately available choice is to “Log out”, positioned inconspicuously at the bottom of the menu (Figure 24). The abundance of features and nested menus makes the deletion process both overwhelming and obscure.



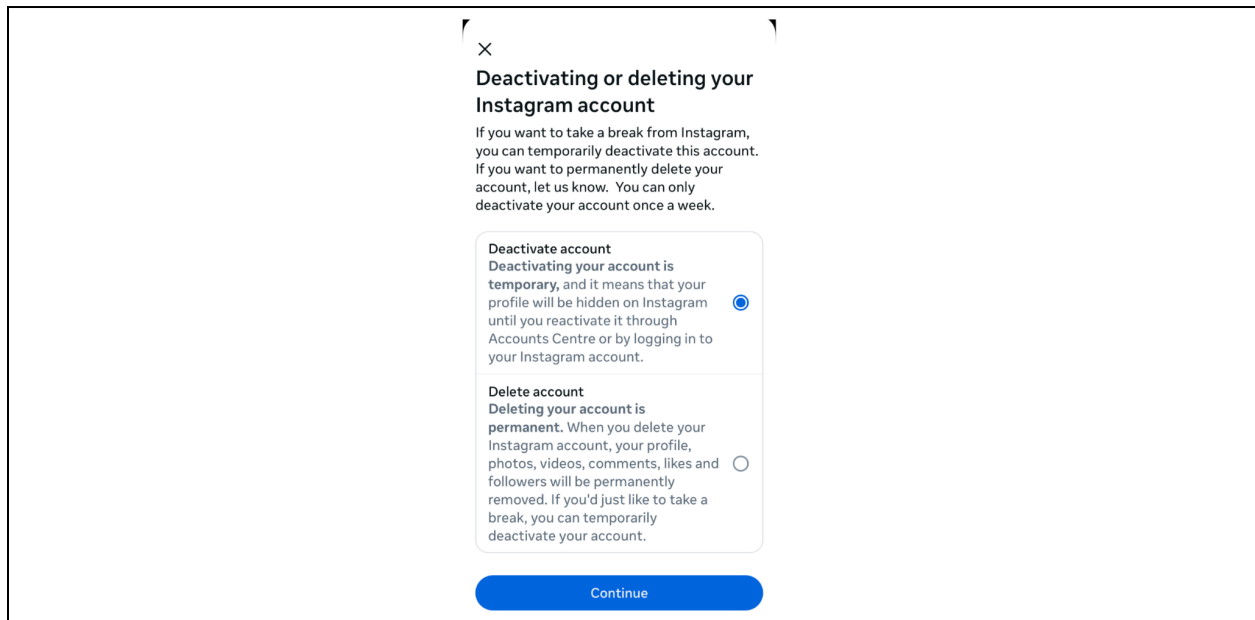
**Figure 24.** Instagram’s “Log Out” Option

After a thorough exploration of the interface, I found that users must navigate through several steps—Accounts Centre → Personal Details → Account Ownership and Control → Deactivation and Deletion—before reaching the option to remove their account (Figure 25). Notably, the interface places “Deactivate Account” *before* “Delete Account”, subtly encouraging users to take a temporary break rather than leave permanently. More critically, the default selection highlights “Deactivate” rather than “Delete” (Figure 26), reinforcing user retention by design. This layered and indirect pathway echoes Gray et al.’s (2018) concept of “dark patterns”, where designers exploit insights into user behaviour and psychology to implement deceptive interface choices

that serve the platform's interests rather than the user's. In this instance, Instagram's design intentionally discourages permanent account deletion, prioritising platform continuity over user autonomy.



**Figure 25.** Steps to Deactivate or Delete an Instagram Account



**Figure 26.** Instagram's Default Option when Deactivating or Deleting an Account

## **Findings and Discussion Summary**

The combination of semi-structured interviews and the walkthrough method proved effective in addressing the research question and developing a nuanced understanding of Instagram's evolution. The interviews offered valuable insight into the lived experiences and personal interpretations of long-term users, revealing how individuals navigate and negotiate Instagram's affordances and social pressures in their everyday lives. This method worked particularly well in capturing the emotional and reflective dimensions of user experience—such as feelings of nostalgia and attachment—which would have been difficult to identify through observational or quantitative methods. The conversational nature of the interviews also allowed for flexibility and depth, enabling participants to articulate both their frustrations and continued investment in Instagram.

Contrastingly, the walkthrough method provided a structured and systematic means of analysing Instagram's technical and visual design. It offered a critical lens through which to understand the platform's embedded logics—particularly its strategies for encouraging engagement, collecting data, and monetising visibility. This method complemented the in-depth interviews by situating user perspectives within the broader technological and commercial architecture of the app. It illuminated how features such as algorithmic feeds, integrated shopping tools, and creator dashboards reinforce behaviours that sustain user activity and platform growth. The walkthrough thus grounded the interview findings in tangible design evidence, illustrating how Instagram's interface subtly governs user behaviour while maintaining the illusion of choice and autonomy.

While the interviews captured diverse user experiences, the sample's small size and geographic specificity—focusing solely on Australian users—limit the generalisability of the findings. Participants were drawn primarily from similar cultural and generational backgrounds, which may have influenced their perceptions of authenticity, connection, and digital identity. Likewise, while the walkthrough method was effective in identifying structural patterns, it could not capture the full dynamism of user interaction or account for how features are experienced across different demographics or contexts. Since Instagram's rollouts are not always global or simultaneous, and interfaces are frequently updated, users inevitably experience the platform differently. As such, the findings presented here offer a conceptual understanding of Instagram's

interface rather than a universally representative one. Additionally, the walkthrough assumes a degree of design stability, yet Instagram's constant evolution means that it provides only a snapshot in time rather than a definitive account.

Despite these limitations, the mixed-method approach proved highly effective overall. The interviews foregrounded user agency and subjective experience, while the walkthrough exposed the technological and commercial mechanisms shaping those experiences. Together, they offered both a human-centred and system-level view of Instagram—revealing how the platform's design and users' lived realities intersect. The blend of these two methods enabled a richer and more critical understanding of Instagram as both a cultural artefact and a commercial infrastructure, demonstrating that studying social media requires attention to its technological design as well as its social use.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

The role of Instagram within the contemporary digital landscape is multi-dimensional, shaped by technological innovation, commercial imperatives, and evolving user practices. Once a platform devoted to spontaneous photo-sharing, genuine connection, and community, Instagram has since transformed into a complex ecosystem dominated by content creation, branding, and algorithmic visibility. This thesis examined how this transition has redefined user engagement, particularly in relation to how individuals socialise and maintain connections online. Drawing on the lived experiences of long-term users in Australia who joined the platform before 2015, the research traced Instagram's trajectory from its launch in 2010 to 2025—charting its progression from an SNS to an all-encompassing commercial hub that integrates self-expression, entertainment, and commerce.

This study aimed to understand how users navigate and negotiate Instagram's evolving design and commercialisation, as well as how these shifts influence their perceptions of authenticity and interpersonal connection. In addressing the central research question—*How has Instagram's evolution into a commercial and content-driven platform reshaped user engagement, particularly in socialising and maintaining personal connections?*—the findings revealed that Instagram's development cannot be understood as a purely technological process. Rather, it is a sociocultural negotiation shaped by corporate design decisions, economic logics, and user interpretation. Users were found not to be “passive” recipients or audiences of technological change but “active” participants who construct meaning and function through their interactions, resistances, and adaptations (Hall, 1973).

Based on the interview data, participants fondly recalled the early years of Instagram as simple, community-driven, and authentic, but also perceived its current version as commercialised, competitive, and performance-oriented. The introduction of algorithmic curation, advertising systems, and affordances such as Reels, the Shop tab, and the Professional Dashboard has altered both the platform's interface and the very nature of user interaction. What was once a space for sharing everyday, lived moments has become an environment where visibility, aesthetics, and engagement metrics determine social value. This shift has redefined participation as a form of

“digital labour”, where users’ identities, attention, and creativity are commodified for platform growth (Nouri, 2018; Ayoub, 2022; Kubler, 2023). However, the findings also revealed that there is no singular pattern of engagement with Instagram. Each user navigates and negotiates their relationship with the platform differently. Many participants demonstrated agency by selectively engaging with certain features, curating their feeds, or establishing smaller, private spaces—such as through the “Close Friends” function—to preserve authenticity. Others used the platform as a creative outlet, finding enjoyment from its visual and interactive affordances despite ongoing commercial pressures. This diversity of user experience highlights that engagement on Instagram is a dynamic and negotiated process rather than a uniform or predictable one. Instagram’s evolution has therefore not eradicated social connection but transformed its conditions, requiring users to continuously balance authenticity, visibility, and community within a commercialised environment.

The theoretical frameworks underpinning this research—the social construction of technology (SCOT) (Pinch & Bijker, 1987) and the encoding/decoding model (E/D) (Hall, 1973)—provided critical foundations for understanding these dynamics. The SCOT framework illuminated that Instagram’s technological evolution is socially shaped through interactions between designers, users, and market pressures. Its transformation into a commerce-oriented site was not inevitable but resulted from negotiations among relevant social groups, each influencing the platform’s development and meaning. Hall’s (1973) E/D model further enriched this study by demonstrating how users interpret Instagram’s encoded meanings in varied ways. Some participants accepted its focus on performance and visibility (dominant-hegemonic reading), others engaged selectively while critiquing its commercial nature (negotiated reading), and a smaller group rejected these structures altogether and used alternative SNSs to maintain autonomy (oppositional reading).

Together, these theoretical perspectives reveal that technology and society exist in a reciprocal relationship. Instagram’s features are not fixed determinants of behaviour but socially negotiated affordances that reflect broader cultural values and power relations. Users’ interpretations and actions play a central role in shaping how Instagram is used and understood, even within a structure governed by corporate interests. Hence, Instagram’s evolution exemplifies how digital

technologies are co-constructed through ongoing dialogue between design intention and human practice.

The implications of this study extend beyond Instagram itself, pointing to wider transformations in digital culture under platform capitalism. As more SNSs increasingly merge communication with commerce, the boundaries between authenticity, labour, and self-presentation are blurred. Users are simultaneously participants and commodities, navigating spaces where connection is both facilitated and constrained by algorithms and metrics. In turn, social connection becomes a quantifiable form of engagement that contributes to platform profitability. Nonetheless, the persistent desire for authenticity, creativity, and closeness among users demonstrates that the social dimension of online interaction on Instagram continues to endure despite these constraints.

Moreover, this thesis found that Instagram's design actively encodes a commercial ideology that privileges attention and activity over community. Features such as algorithmic recommendations, targeted ads, and engagement prompts subtly steer users towards behaviours that generate data and sustain visibility cycles. As found from the data, participants expressed fatigue, anxiety, or self-consciousness within this performative environment. Still, users also developed coping strategies—such as limiting use, curating audiences, or engaging with different SNSs—to reclaim agency and meaning within the platform's confines. These adaptive behaviours embody everyday forms of negotiation, resistance, and reinterpretation that define contemporary digital life.

It is important to acknowledge that the findings of this study are not generalisable, as they are based on a small, qualitative sample of users in Australia. The insights provide depth rather than breadth, capturing how long-term users have experienced Instagram's evolution within a specific cultural and temporal context. Future research could build upon this work by including users from different geographical and cultural backgrounds to develop a more extensive understanding of Instagram's global influence. Furthermore, as Instagram continues to evolve rapidly with frequent new feature updates, future research could revisit this topic to examine how users adapt to newer affordances in greater detail—such as Notes, AI tools, and evolving recommendation systems. Incorporating participatory methods, such as inviting participants to share their personal

feeds, could also offer richer insight into how individuals navigate and interpret the platform visually and interactively, while revealing their lived experiences.

Future research could also extend this enquiry to emerging SNSs such as YouTube, BeReal, Spotify, or Little Red Note (XiaoHongShu) to compare how different digital environments foster, or hinder, authentic social connection. Comparative analysis across platforms could reveal how varying design philosophies, algorithms, and community cultures influence user engagement differently, offering a more holistic understanding of digital sociality in the platform era.

Ultimately, this thesis contributes to the growing body of scholarship that views social media not simply as communication tools but as sociotechnical systems embedded in cultural and economic contexts. Instagram's evolution from a photo-sharing app into a commercialised, algorithmically driven platform encapsulates the broader dynamics of platformisation and datafication that define 21st-century everyday digital life. Yet, within these dynamics, users remain active agents of meaning-making who interpret, adapt, and redefine their engagement on their own terms.

In conclusion, Instagram's development illustrates that technology and society are intertwined in an ongoing process of negotiation. While commercialisation has undoubtedly redefined how users connect and express themselves, it has not extinguished their creativity, resistance, or authenticity. Users continue to find ways to engage meaningfully—through adaptation, critique, and reinterpretation—demonstrating the resilience of human connection in an age increasingly governed by algorithms and attention economies. Instagram's story reflects a broader truth about digital culture: even within systems of control and commodification, human agency persists. The future of social media, therefore, will depend not only on technological innovation but also on how users continue to navigate, contest, and redefine the spaces in which they connect.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A - REDCap Eligibility Survey:

<https://redcap.sydney.edu.au/surveys/?s=8T9CDDAHNEYRXKM7>

### Eligibility Check

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study on the transformation of Instagram use in Australia. Please complete the eligibility survey below, and our Chief Investigator will contact you if you meet the participation criteria. Thank you.

1) Name (Does not have to be your real name and can be a pseudonym) *	<input type="text"/>
2) Contact for Research: E-mail *	<input type="text"/>
3) Year of Birth *	<input type="text"/>
4) Are you an Australian citizen or permanent resident (PR) living in Australia? *	<input type="button" value="Yes"/> <input type="button" value="No"/> reset
5) Do you have an active history of Instagram use? *	<input type="button" value="Yes"/> <input type="button" value="No"/> reset

## Appendix B - Participant Information Sheet and Participant Consent Form:

### 1. Participant Consent Form:

[https://unisyd-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/s\\_boey\\_sydney\\_edu\\_au/EWaQOMCeKyJBpjbV6KFRd0ABr2hpXe8FnEPmuN4IQ3V1dg](https://unisyd-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/s_boey_sydney_edu_au/EWaQOMCeKyJBpjbV6KFRd0ABr2hpXe8FnEPmuN4IQ3V1dg)

### 2. Participant Information Sheet:

[https://unisyd-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/s\\_boey\\_sydney\\_edu\\_au/EdPgJDw-VaxOmJq1bTq2N-0BZ\\_Iqjir5UJ9eomyUeHzAMg](https://unisyd-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/s_boey_sydney_edu_au/EdPgJDw-VaxOmJq1bTq2N-0BZ_Iqjir5UJ9eomyUeHzAMg)

**Appendix C** - Semi-Structured Interview Questions:

[https://unisyd-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/s\\_boey\\_sydney\\_edu\\_au/EWHQcVtoxS5IpnswiRmpjn0BRQCLqweAgptily6JIYTpkw](https://unisyd-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/s_boey_sydney_edu_au/EWHQcVtoxS5IpnswiRmpjn0BRQCLqweAgptily6JIYTpkw)

1. What are the first 3 words that come to mind when you think of Instagram?
2. When did you first start using Instagram?
3. How would you describe your early experience using Instagram?
4. When did you start noticing a change in Instagram's focus toward commercial/business content?
5. How has your usage of Instagram changed since it became more commercialised?
6. Do you think Instagram still serves its original purpose of helping users socialise and stay connected with others? Why or why not?
7. How do you feel about the rise of influencers, UGCs, sponsored content and ads on your feed?
8. Has Instagram's focus on branding and aesthetics changed the way you present yourself online?
9. Due to these changes, how do you maintain personal connections on Instagram now?
10. Do you use alternative platforms (e.g., Facebook, BeReal, TikTok) to maintain personal interactions? Why or why not?
11. How do you feel about Instagram now showing posts it thinks you'll like (i.e., suggested content), instead of showing them in the order they were posted (i.e., chronological)?
12. If you had the choice, would you prefer the earlier version of Instagram or the current version? Why?

**Appendix D** - Interview Data Analysis:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1rsHAAVW57raUQtLR3oHfNiW0GseWH52dxDH3kW0AIQc/edit?usp=sharing>