



Creators, Algorithms, and Visibility: A Content Analysis of Instagram's Explore Page

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Abstract. Digital platforms increasingly amplify emotionally arousing content, creating visibility structures that favour sexually suggestive or provocative posts. Drawing on Herman and Chomsky's "Manufacturing Consent", this study treats recommendation systems and engagement metrics as contemporary filters that privilege attention-optimized content beyond user preference. Using Actor-Network Theory, it frames "digital provocation" as emerging through interactions among influencers, audiences, algorithms, hashtags, smartphones, and policy documents, with agency distributed across the sociotechnical network. The study has two key objectives: first, to investigate how Instagram's algorithm enhances the visibility of sexually suggestive or obscene content and second, to examine the borderline content strategies creators use to maximize engagement. Methodologically, a mixed quantitative–qualitative content analysis of 150 Instagram Explore page posts was conducted using neutral, mildly sexual, and explicit keywords. While limited by keyword selection, algorithmic opacity, and coder interpretation, the study contributes to debates on algorithmic accountability, digital morality, and platform governance.

Keywords: Instagram, Algorithmic Visibility, Creator Tactics.

1 Introduction

Instagram is a global social media platform centred on mobile photo and video sharing. Founded in 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger and was later acquired by Meta (formerly Facebook) in 2012 [7], Instagram lets users post images or short videos with captions, hashtags, and filters. The platform's architecture comprises the Feed, Stories, Reels, and the Explore page which is designed to facilitate continuous engagement through personalized content recommendations [12][21]. Users can follow others to see their posts in a personal feed, send private "direct" messages, and browse content by topic or hashtag [7]. The Explore page is curated by the algorithm which recommends popular posts tailored to each user's interests. By September 2025 Instagram had surpassed three billion monthly active users worldwide[14], making it one of the largest social networks in existence.

In India, Instagram's reach is very vast. Data shows that India has the world's largest Instagram audience which is about 508.1 million users as of November 2025 [20]. This represents roughly 34.3% of the entire population. Indian Instagram users skew young and male: about 69.8% are men, and the largest age group is 18–24 (about 38.79% of

users) [20]. These figures suggest that Instagram is extremely popular across age groups in India and that content appealing to young adults (especially men) dominates the platform.

Instagram's user base includes a diverse creator community. Its ease of visual storytelling has given rise to the "influencer" phenomenon. Influencers are individuals (often celebrities, models, or creative amateurs) who gain large followings by posting engaging photos or videos. The growth of the platform has helped influencers to routinely partner with brands, often featuring products in their posts for compensation [7]. Popular content categories on Instagram range from fashion, beauty, and lifestyle to travel, fitness, news, and entertainment. Creators aim to grab attention with eye-catching or sensational imagery, since the business model rewards engagement. In this crowded ecosystem, both benign lifestyle posts and more provocative content circulate widely depending on trends and follower interests.

A key factor in what content succeeds on Instagram is its ranking algorithms. The platform's feeds and Explore page are not strictly chronological, instead, Instagram uses engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) and other signals to prioritize posts. Studies have noted that social media algorithms are "designed to amplify information that sustains engagement" [4]. In practice, this means content that provokes strong reactions, such as excitement, outrage, or sexual arousal, is more likely to be promoted. Research on similar platforms finds that engagement-focused algorithms can inadvertently boost polarizing or sensational material beyond what users explicitly request [4][19]. In other words, the Instagram algorithm can act as a filter that favours emotionally charged or attention-grabbing posts. This dynamic raises the possibility that sexually suggestive or provocative content might receive outsized visibility simply because it receives more clicks and comments.

Despite Instagram's prominence, few studies have examined these algorithmic dynamics in India's media context. Most research on social media algorithms and content amplification comes from Western settings or global perspectives, leaving the Indian case under-explored. The goals of the study are to investigate whether Instagram's algorithm increases the visibility of sexually suggestive or obscene content and to examine the borderline or provocative tactics that content creators use to boost their reach and engagement. This study conducts a mixed-method content analysis of posts on Instagram's Explore page. Sampled Explore page posts surfaced by different keyword searches (unrelated, mildly related and explicitly related) and code each for factors like bareness, suggestiveness, provocation, objectification, tone, and engagement metrics. By linking post features with algorithmic placement, this study assesses how the platform's design and creator strategies interact.

This paper is significant for debates about algorithmic accountability and digital culture. In a time when social media's attention economy can circulate sensational content rapidly, understanding these processes is critical. Drawing on Herman and Chomsky's ideas of media "filters" and on Actor-Network Theory, this study reconceptualizes Instagram's content visibility as the outcome of a network of human and machine actors [3][16]. The findings of the study will inform discussion on online morality by showing how a major platform's design incentives and user practices

jointly shape what audiences see. In short, this study offers empirically grounded insight into Instagram's algorithmic influence and creator tactics, a context of growing importance in the Indian social media landscape.

2 Literature Review

Social media platforms are transitioning from simple content hosting sites to active gatekeepers of attention. This transition has redefined the prospects of cultural production. These platforms have become "significant arbiters of content visibility and trending topics" [18]. Algorithms function as a "behind the scenes machinery" within this environment and rely upon "user preferences and complex behavioural patterns to recommend content to users via the Explore tab" [2]. Cotter [6] observes, the "pursuit of influence resembles a game constructed around 'rules' encoded in algorithms"; she terms this phenomenon as "visibility game". This is because "algorithms establish the conditions through which visibility is constructed online"; they effectively serve as "disciplinary apparatuses that prescribe participatory norms" [6]. As a consequence of the conditions provided by the algorithm, creators are increasingly "beholden to constant changes in the social media ecosystem, from technical features and algorithmic configuration to renewed terms of service and policy restrictions" [2].

This structural power creates a condition of "platform dependence", where the success of the creators is "hitched to particular platforms of cultural production" [2]. Arriagada and Ibáñez [2] describe the consequent psychological and professional pressure through the title of their paper: "You Need At Least One Picture Daily, if Not, You're Dead". They based this title on what one of their interviewees quoted. This dependency "reinforces creators' constant presence online", leading to a subjective state where "without daily content, creators cease to exist for the platform and their followers". The "threat of invisibility" thus "disciplines influencers into normalizing their behaviour or risk becoming invisible" [2]. To maintain their standing, creators engage in "relational labour" to sustain a connection with followers, often adjusting their strategies based on an "understanding of the logic behind algorithmic curation" [2][18].

A concern which is raised in contemporary digital governance which is the way recommendation systems appear to incentivise sexually suggestive material these days. A research by non-profit NGO, AlgorithmWatch [15] suggests that "Instagram's algorithm strong-arms users into showing skin". In their empirical analysis, they found that "posts that contained pictures of women in undergarment or bikini were 54% more likely to appear in the newsfeed". This shows that there is a structural bias where Instagram is elevating the content that increases the emotional arousal of the user. This content can be sexually suggestive or provocative. Creators often feel that they must "thread this very fine line between revealing enough to reach their followers but not revealing so much that they get booted off the platform".

Zuckerberg (2018) as cited in Are [1] has defined such material as "borderline content", which "toes the line of acceptability" and results in "higher engagement even if people do not approve of it". Tests done by leading American news organization, The

Wall Street Journal [10], revealed that “Instagram regularly recommends sexual videos to accounts for teenagers that appear interested in racy content, and does so within minutes of when they first log in”. This happens even when Meta’s platform policies intend to restrict sensitive material. This algorithmic elevation of provocative content is often blamed on “flaws in the AI responsible for scanning and filtering content”, leading to a situation where “sensational content” is inadvertently prioritised [13]. For many, this results in a “Shadowban Cycle”, where platforms, “for fear of being seen as promoting or facilitating prostitution,” censor manifestations of nudity while their algorithms simultaneously reward suggestive imagery with reach (H.R.1865, Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act of 2017) [1].

Creators use a variety of content creation techniques to get more visibility on social media platforms. These range from “search-friendly keywords” and “SEO” to more controversial methods such as “reciprocal engagement groups known as ‘pods’” [22][6]. Petre et al. [22] identify a phenomenon of “platform paternalism,” where tech companies “denigrate these activities as system-gaming or manipulation” while also creating the economic pressures that make these activities necessary. The boundary between “legitimate strategy” and “illegitimate algorithmic manipulation” is, in many cases, “nebulous and largely reflective of their material interests”.

Creators attempt to resolve “paradoxical tensions between the aims of control and autonomy”. These responses include “self-centred measures” like “improving metrics, pre-production, and being a pioneer” and “extraneous measures” like “own businesses, products, and sponsorships” [9]. Some creators even try “impersonating” a different gender, as a campaign named @everybodyvisible had suggested that “users should change their gender to male” to increase their engagement and avoid sexist censorship [1]. These techniques represent a “negotiation process between platform owners and users to control the conditions for information exchange” [6]. In the long run, creators start to feel “compelled to understand those changes” and develop “cooperative algorithm hacking” strategies to “game Instagram’s algorithm” [2].

The algorithmic recommendations “functions on the propagation of gender bias and stereotypes, by learning from the content produced by creators.” as well as “algorithms perpetuate gender stereotypes by processing and learning content imbued with gender biases” [18]. In research on Brazilian women as portrayed on Instagram by Charlita and Neves [5], they found that the “typical woman” on Instagram’s top ranked content is portrayed in “swimming suits or gym outfit”. Which suggested a “recurrence of real-world aesthetic related stereotypes”.

The gender bias goes further than visual aesthetics to professional representation as well. Metaxa et al. as cited in Lou et al., [18] discussed the “representation of gender and racial biases in professions within mainstream content controlled by algorithms”. Singh et al. as cited in Lou et al., [18] noted how algorithms can lead to a “lack of diversity in created content and further reinforcing gender biases”. Norberg et al. as cited in Sokolova et al., [24] commented, “Instagram users seem to exhibit an objectification paradox, that, similarly to the privacy paradox, shows incoherence between beliefs and behaviour”. “Although, users imply they wish for less objectification and more authenticity, ideal and more objectifying photos are presumed

to be more successful online and are more likely to be posted” [24]. This has resulted in a scenario wherein “the female body remains the marker of sex and object of sexual desire, as well as symbol of obscenity” while being subjected to “puritan” and “archaic conceptions of decency” [1].

The constant struggle between engagement and safety has resulted in “content moderation challenges”. Users across the world have reported an “unexpected surge in violent and NSFW (not safe for work) content in their Reels feeds,” which Meta pinned on a “technical error” [13]. The Oversight Board [25] mentions that “most content moderation decisions are now made by machines,” and these “automated systems struggle to understand context, leading to incorrect applications of the rules”. This has resulted in cases of “overenforcement,” such as removal of posts for breast cancer awareness, and “underenforcement,” where “coded hate speech” or “image based sexual abuse” remains on platform.

In India, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) has warned platforms to “act on obscene, unlawful content, or face consequences” [23]. Laws like the Digital Personal Data Protection Act of 2023 aim for “the protection of personal data but also the need to shield minors” with stricter legal guidelines for the platforms [13]. The Indian Law Enforcement has cases registered against unidentified users of platforms like Instagram and YouTube for “posting and promoting obscene content” [26]. Unfolding such incidents demand algorithmic accountability and digital morality in a landscape where “algorithms can reinforce existing societal biases” [25].

Algorithms, as creators perceive it, remain “unreliable” and “fickle” [9]. This led to them devising “new, hyper-specific revenue streams” beyond just “tipping and paid-subscription services” [17]. These services were launched by Meta as “financial incentive for producing content” making a “creator economy” [11]. This gave rise to new platforms, like NewNew, which enabled fans to “pay to vote in polls to control some of a creator’s day to day decisions,” making an “economy of attention where you purchase moments in other people’s lives” [17].

Some influencers have also turned towards “crypto world” and “non-fungible tokens (NFTs)” to create “independent economies with their fans”. For example, Logan Paul sold “\$5 million worth of NFTs,” while others sold “photos of their feet as NFTs” [17]. Meta employees were concerned that these new services come with risks, such that “paid subscription tools... were being misused by adults seeking to profit from exploiting their own children” [11]. The pivot to “monetizing the minutia of their lives” underlines the trend where “the fans are as much part of the creation experience as the creator” [17].

In conclusion, the literature suggests that the interplay between algorithmic amplification and creator tactics has produced a digital ecosystem where visibility is a “reward” for those who successfully navigate “disciplinary apparatuses” [6]. While creators use a range of tactics to maintain their “brand subjectivities,” [2] they do so within an architecture that frequently amplifies provocation and “borderline content” [1] at the expense of “algorithmic fairness” [5] and “digital decency”. The resulting landscape is one of “paradoxical tensions” between “platform control and user

autonomy,” [9] necessitating a more thorough examination of algorithmic accountability and the “social impacts of these algorithm driven platforms” [18].

3 Research Objectives

- To investigate the role of Instagram’s algorithm in increasing visibility of sexually suggestive or obscene content.
- To examine the borderline content creation techniques used by Instagram content creators to enhance their visibility and audience engagement.

4 Theoretical Framework

For providing insight into how structural filters shape media environments, this study incorporates Manufacturing Consent [8]. On Instagram, algorithmic recommendation functions as a modern filter, privileging content that sustains advertising revenue and engagement, while backlash such as arrests or moral outrage in India can be identified as contemporary forms of “flak”. This perspective highlights how obscene or suggestive content persists not simply due to user demand but as part of systemic profit-driven structures. Thus, algorithmic filtering functions as a digital extension of traditional media gatekeeping, shaping not only what is visible but also what is thinkable and permissible online. Yet, power in digital environments is not only external or top-down; it is also internalized and operationalized through everyday practices of creators and audiences.

This study also incorporates Actor-Network Theory [16] to account for the distributed agency of human and non-human actors in producing “digital provocation”. From influencers and audiences to algorithms, hashtags, AI moderation systems, smartphones, and regulatory documents, obscenity on Instagram emerges as the outcome of interactions within a heterogeneous network. ANT treats human and non-human actors symmetrically, highlighting that responsibility and agency are not located in one place (creators or algorithms) but are co-constructed across the sociotechnical assemblage, emphasizing that meaning and outcomes emerge from their interactions rather than from any single source of control. This complements the governmentality lens by emphasizing not only how power disciplines but also how agency circulates across networks of human and technological actors.

5 Methodology

The study employs a mixed quantitative–qualitative content analysis of 150 public posts surfaced on Instagram’s Explore page.

- Searches were conducted with three categories of keywords,
 - Unrelated / Neutral,
 - Mildly sexual and
 - Explicitly sexual
- Five search terms per category were decided based on discussions with young Instagram users and the top ten posts under each term were sampled for analysis. Search terms that were used,

Table 1. Search terms by category.

Unrelated	Mildly Related	Explicitly Related
Trending	Girls	Hot
Celebrity	Men	Sensual
Reels	Night	Seductive
Popular	Brown	Sultry
Viral	Black	Wet

- Each post was coded on a structured coding sheet for,

Table 2. Metric and scale.

Scale	Range	Meaning
Bareness	0-2	0 = None, 1 = Mild (cleavage, bare chested men), 2 = Bareness (scantily clothed, bikini)
Sexual Suggestiveness	0-2	0 = None, 1 = Mild (innuendo, mild sexualized imagery), 2 = Sexual act depicted
Provocation	0-4	0 = No provocative elements, 1 = Mildly suggestive (implied sensuality, artistic nudity), 2 = Moderately provocative (revealing clothing, suggestive poses), 3 = Highly provocative (boundary-testing imagery, near-nudity), 4 = Potentially obscene (challenges community guidelines explicitly)
Profanity	0-2	0 = None, 1 = Mild (slang, mild sexual/insulting terms), 2 = Strong (explicit profanity, strong vulgarity)
Objectification	0-2	0 = None, 1 = Mild (double entendre, subtle objectification, provocative semiotics), 2 = Severe (explicit derogatory comments, degrading depictions, self objectification)

- Other details that were taken,
 - Account type: Category of the account
 - Gender: Male/ Female/ N/A, gender of the Creator
 - Hashtags: Number of hashtags present
 - Caption Length: Number of words in the caption
 - Post date: Date on which the post was published
 - Engagement Metrics, namely, views, likes, comments, shares and reposts
 - Tone/ Intent: Judgment of the intent behind the post.
 - Thumbnail suggestiveness/ Clickbait: Yes/No, Whether the thumbnail had suggestive elements or it was used as a clickbait.
 - Sponsored/ Non-Sponsored: Whether the post was sponsored or not.
- Account Setup,
 - Created new accounts for each category, Unrelated, Mildly and Explicit
 - Accounts were made with only email aliases (for verification), age and usernames specified.
 - Gender wasn't specified. "Prefer Not to Say" option was selected.
 - No accounts were followed.
 - No in app permissions were given.
 - No notification allowed.

6 Results and Discussion

6.1 Quantitative Observations

This subsection reports the principal quantitative findings from the mixed content analysis. All results below draw directly from the coded variables in the supplied codebook and the descriptive dataset (Table 1 and 2). For clarity, counts refer to the number of posts (out of $n = 50$ per category) that registered a non-zero value on a binary/presence indicator; this refers to the average raw coding score on the scale indicated in the Methodology section.

Table 3. Counts and proportions for four primary indicators, across the three keyword categories.

Category	Sexual Suggestiveness (count, %)	Bareness (count, %)	Provocation (count, %)	Objectification (count, %)
Unrelated	19 (38%)	29 (58%)	32 (64%)	23 (46%)
Mild	37 (74%)	40 (80%)	43 (86%)	36 (72%)
Explicit	43 (86%)	49 (98%)	49 (98%)	38 (76%)

Table 4. Mean coding scores for four primary indicators, across the three keyword categories.

Category	Sexual Suggestiveness (0-2) (mean)	Bareness (0-2) (mean)	Provocation (0-4) (mean)	Objectification (0-2) (mean)
Unrelated	0.38	0.62	0.92	0.48
Mild	0.74	0.9	1.4	0.8
Explicit	0.86	1.24	1.92	0.9

Bareness scores (scale of 0-2) rose sharply across the three samples, demonstrating a structured escalation (refer Table 3 & 4):

Unrelated Terms: Mean = 0.62

Mildly Related Terms: Mean = 0.90

Explicitly Related Terms: Mean = 1.24

Even in searches using neutral terms, 58% of posts displayed bareness, indicating that sexualized aesthetics are normalized in general visibility spaces. By contrast, the Explicitly Related category contained the highest intensity of bareness, with 13 out of 50 search results approaching the maximum score of 2, signifying consistent exposure to scantily clothed bodies.

Sexual Suggestiveness scores (scale of 0-2) followed a similar trajectory (refer Table 3 & 4):

Unrelated Terms: Mean = 0.38

Mildly Related Terms: Mean = 0.74

Explicitly Related Terms: Mean = 0.86

Majority of the posts across all the categories scored 1 under sexual suggestiveness which indicates that while overt sexual acts are uncommon, implied sexuality is prominently surfaced.

These findings affirm that Instagram rarely delivers explicit sexual acts in Explore feeds, but it pushes “soft-core” erotic aesthetics, a form of algorithmic titillation optimized for engagement without crossing internal policy boundaries.

Provocation scores (scale of 0-4) across the three categories (refer Table 3 & 4):

Unrelated Terms: Mean = 0.92

Mildly Related Terms: Mean = 1.4

Explicitly Related Terms: Mean = 1.92

The high mean values across the category mean that the intensity of provocation is strong. The baseline is observably high with even the Unrelated category scoring 1 or more, with 1 being the mode for the category.

Profanity scores (scale of 0-2) across all categories were extremely low: Unrelated Terms: Mean = 0.06

Mildly Related Terms: Mean = 0.02

Explicitly Related Terms: Mean = 0.02

Profanity is not a key determinant of recommended content, as Instagram’s algorithm appears to privilege visual rather than verbal provocation. This supports the broader theorization of digital provocation as a primarily visual economy, where bodies, gestures, and cues matter more than speech.

Objectification scores (scale of 0-2) were consistently high (refer Table 3 & 4):

Unrelated Terms: Mean = 0.48

Mildly Related Terms: Mean = 0.80

Explicitly Related Terms: Mean = 0.90

Objectification is structurally rewarded regardless of search intent, making it pervasive and not limited to sexual searches. Resulting in high exposure to sexually suggestive content even without intentionally seeking it. Objectifying representations, especially of women, are embedded in Instagram’s aesthetic norms.

Gender Skewness of the Explore page. Across all categories, female creators were the primary subjects:

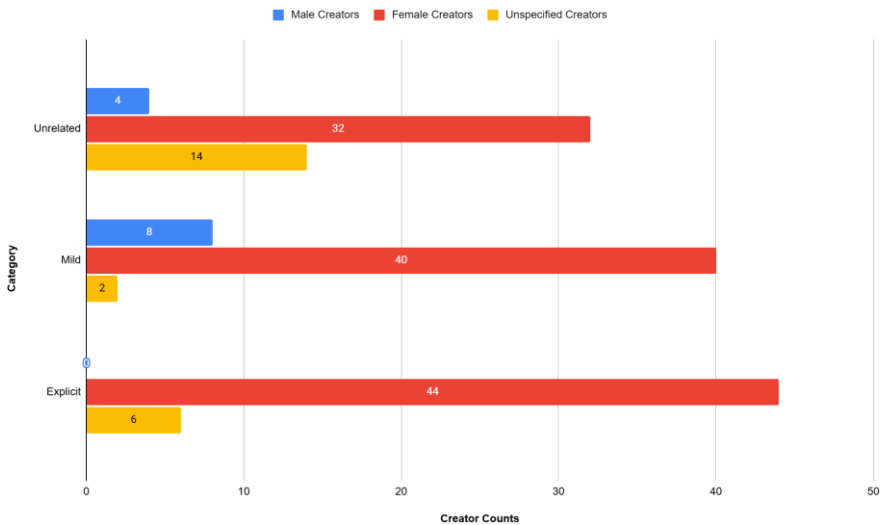


Fig. 1. Figure shows the counts of male, female and unspecified genders appearing in posts across the three keyword categories.

Under the Unrelated terms category, even the accounts which were managed by male creators primarily featured women. This indicates a strong reliance on female bodies to grab attention irrespective of the neutrality of the search term. The number of posts featuring a female creator increased when Mildly Related terms were searched. The skewness can be seen through an observation that when the keyword “Men” was searched a post came up among the top ten posts which featured a female actress. This shows that the algorithm prefers female featuring content even under male oriented keyword search. Under the Explicitly Related category, there was no search result

which featured male content among the top ten posts under each keyword. This shows a gender imbalance in how sexualized content is surfaced and rewarded by the algorithm of the platform.

Thumbnail Suggestiveness and Exhibitionism as Tactics. Exhibitionism (capturing explicitly attention-seeking, often revealing presentations) and clickbait turned out to be go to engagement strategies. The count of content’s tone/intent as Exhibitionism were substantial across categories i.e. Unrelated = 14 posts; Mild = 23; Explicit = 26, indicating that creators frequently use visually provocative poses to increase engagement. Thumbnail Suggestiveness counts came as Unrelated = 26 posts; Mild = 33; Explicit = 49. There is an increment in the counts going from Unrelated to Explicit category of search terms. Thumbnails were most of the times more suggestive than the actual content, serving as visual baits to attract clicks and views. This was seen frequently among fitness and lifestyle influencers, whose core content primarily focused on health, travel, or daily routines, but they still relied on suggestive thumbnails, revealing attire or provocative poses to gain visibility on the Explore page.

Sponsored and Promotional Posts. Sponsored content refers to posts for which a brand or entity has paid the creator, while promotion (as intent) includes both paid and self product or service promotion.

Table 5. Count of sponsored vs intended promotional content.

Category	Sponsored Content	Promotion (as intent)
Unrelated	2	3
Mild	7	7
Explicit	9	11

Promotional posts were less common but the numbers increased across categories. The increase in the number of sponsored and promotional content while moving from Unrelated to Explicitly Related category (see Table 4) shows that creators use sexualized attention techniques for yielding visibility for their products/services or for the brand they are endorsing.

Algorithmic Visibility of Sexualized Content. Sexualized and provocative features appear at non-trivial rates even in the Unrelated or neutral search condition. Specifically, 38% of top posts returned under unrelated/neutral keywords contained some degree of sexual suggestiveness, 58% displayed measurable bareness, and 64% registered provocation above zero. Put differently, more than one-third of neutral searches surfaced top ten posts with sexualized elements and well over half surfaced posts with some bareness or provocation. This baseline prevalence strongly suggests that Instagram’s Explore ranking places sexually evocative thumbnails and posts into highly visible positions even where the search term itself does not explicitly request sexualized material.

Interpreting Mean Scores and Proportions. Examining means alongside proportions clarifies that two mechanisms operate simultaneously.

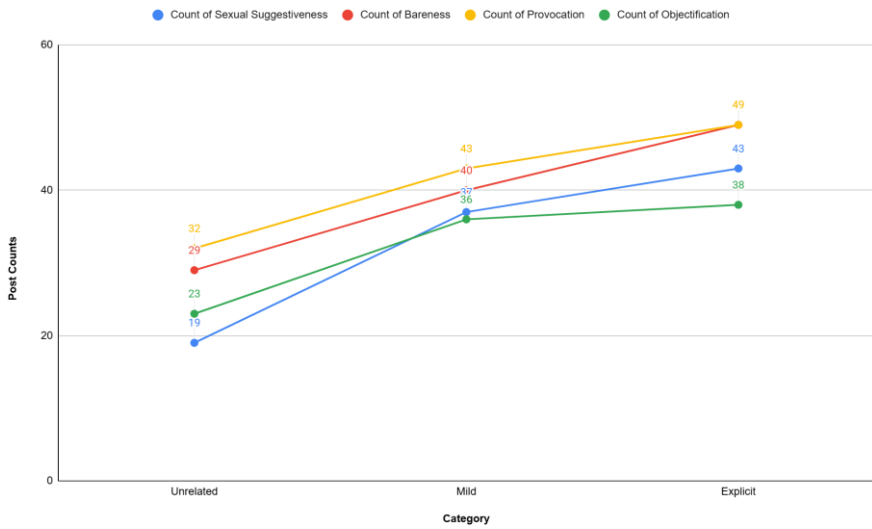


Fig. 2. Figure shows the counts of posts with features of key indicators across the three keyword categories.

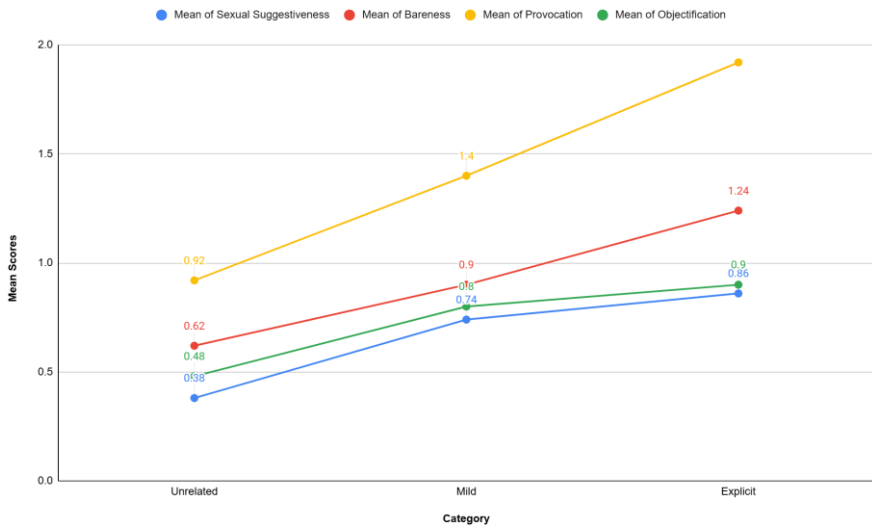


Fig. 3. Figure shows the mean scores of posts with features of key indicators across the three keyword categories.

The proportion statistics show how commonly sexualized content appears in the top results; the means show how intense the coded features are when present. Across all the categories, the prevalence of posts with sexualized features increases while moving from Unrelated to Explicitly related category as evident from the proportion statistics (see Figure 2). Similar patterns can be seen with the intensity of the sexualised features as shown by the means (see Figure 3).

6.2 Qualitative Observations

This section provides qualitative observations which were derived from the content analysis. These focus on how Instagram creators use borderline sexualized techniques to gain more visibility and audience engagement. The analysis highlights recurring visual, framing and engagement-oriented strategies which seem to operate at the edges of platform community guidelines.

Unrelated Terms. Under this category neutral and unrelated keywords were used, namely, Trending, Reels, Celebrity, Popular, and Viral, still, the top ten posts under these keyword searches were dominated by female creators or female subjects.

Female creators frequently showcased their cleavage or buttocks through deliberate posing and camera framing. This shows that there was strategic use of skin exposure. Visual techniques used frequently included mirror selfies with the creators' or subjects' back turned towards the camera, bending forward to draw attention to cleavage or positioning the camera at angles that bring in focus to specific body parts. These techniques suggest a conscious attempt to maximize appeal to the audiences visually while also remaining within the ambiguous boundaries of permissible content.

When the searches were made using the keyword "Celebrity", some of the top ten surfaced posts focused on moments of accidental exposure. The celebrity-paparazzi videos were frequently edited or framed to direct the audiences' attention towards the cleavage, backs or butts of the female celebrities. These videos also featured female celebrities' wardrobe malfunctions. The search result did not include professional achievements or simple public appearances. This shows the prioritization of voyeuristic appeal over mere entertainment.

A small subgroup of posts with primary intent being humour or comedy also relied on mild profanity or objectification for comedic effect which resulted in blurred lines between satire and sexualised engagement bait. Overall, the findings suggest that even when unrelated terms were searched, the search results on the explore page included strategic use of sexualised cues to enhance discoverability.

Mildly related Terms. Under this category searches were made using mildly sexual and gender related terms, namely, Girls, Men, Night, Brown and Black.

Similar to the previous category, the posts featured female creators showcasing cleavage and buttocks through the deliberate use of poses, body orientation and framing. This has been done with a conscious effort to farm engagement through visual

provocation, rather than coincidental. While none of the posts can be called overtly explicit, thereby being within the limits of the platform guidelines, but have maximised suggestiveness within the bounds allowed.

The thumbnails of lifestyle and travel posts often featured bikini-clad women while the other images in the post depicted locations, food, products and other experiences. This provides an example of selective sexualization. This also indicates intentional use of provocative imagery to gain audiences' attention and click farming.

It was observed that the use of profanity was actually lower in comparison to search results in unrelated category of search terms. This indicates a level of language moderation for wider audience appeal, as well as evasion of platform content moderation systems, but having kept the visual provocation intact.

There was an interesting observation that the top three posts under the "Men" keyword featured gay men. The sexualisation of men relied more on bareness than sexual suggestiveness, which was more prevalent in female sexualised content. Meanwhile, the tone, presentation and highlights of the male sexual representation were targeted toward specific communities rather than broad appeal unlike the female sexual representation.

Explicitly related Terms. Under this category explicit sexual terms were used, namely Hot, Wet, Sultry, Seductive and Sensual. The results under this category exhibited the highest concentration of provocative content. Posts with higher levels of bareness, sexual suggestiveness and provocation, as compared to the other two categories, were found.

In this category too, female creators continued to rely on provocative visual strategies like guiding the attention to the cleavage or butts through poses, postures, camera placement and framing. In addition to this, there was use of lighting techniques, with dark environments, red or warm tones and shadow effects too. This was done to create a more sensual atmosphere. These stylistic choices elevated sexual undertones without actually/explicitly depicting sexual acts.

There are concerning observations in regards to lack of age restriction of content, moderation consistency and visibility of some content that surfaced under this category. Exposure to content that features suggestive poses, near-nudity or sensual themes that challenge the platform guidelines is especially concerning for younger audiences.

There were multiple accounts noted to belong to OnlyFans models (and other similar websites such as Fansly and FanCentro). They utilised surrogate promotional techniques to bypass platform restrictions by concealing external links behind URL masking tools such as social cards and LinkTree. Use of such strategies underlines a level of understanding of the platform moderation loopholes, which allows them to monetize sexualised visibility while being compliant on the surface.

All the three keyword categories included a consistent pattern of borderline content creation strategies like sexualized or provocative visual cues, especially involving

female bodies. It was also observed that irrespective of intent of the keyword, the content in the search results showed creators using tactics like skin exposure, suggestive posing, framing, suggestive thumbnail selection and aesthetic enhancements, like lighting techniques, to increase visibility on Instagram's Explore page. Exploitation of such strategies that operate within loopholes of the regulations, raise important concerns regarding algorithmic incentives, gender representation, and the changing norms for digital visibility.

7 Conclusion

This study shows that Instagram's Explore page routinely surfaces sexualized and provocative content, even when search terms are neutral. More than one-third (38%) of the top ten search results under unrelated keywords category contained some degree of sexual suggestiveness, where, 58% showed measurable bareness and 64% included provocation above zero. The mean scores rose across the three search categories: bareness increased from 0.62 (unrelated) to 1.24 (explicit), sexual suggestiveness from 0.38 to 0.86, and provocation from 0.92 to 1.92. While profanity remained minimal, objectification was prevalent in all categories (means 0.48, 0.80, and 0.90). These patterns, when seen together, indicate two interrelated trends, first, sexualized visuals are widespread in visible content, and second, their intensity grows as searches become more sexually explicit (Figure 3). The descriptive counts for creator tactics, thumbnail suggestiveness and exhibitionism as intent, confirm that creators systematically use visual baiting to increase clicks and reach. The rise in sponsored and promotional posts across the categories (sponsored: 2 to 7, 7 to 9; promotion (as intent): 3 to 7, 7 to 11) indicates that monetization incentives synergise with these attention-grabbing tactics.

The findings, when seen through the lens of Manufacturing Consent, suggest that Instagram's recommendation systems function as what can be interpreted as contemporary "filters". The platform does privilege content which sustains engagement metrics which is important for advertising and monetisation logics.

Instagram's Explore page does not only reflect on user demand, but it appears to reflect structural incentives that reward visual provocation. This is done without necessarily breaching explicit policy boundaries. In practical terms, Instagram's algorithm appears to promote "soft-core" erotic aesthetics visuals, like images that provoke arousal or curiosity yet remaining within the borderline of platform rules. Thereby maximizing engagement and revenue while skirting strict moderation.

Actor-Network Theory adds a complementary explanation that responsibility and agency are distributed when it comes to the visibility of content on Instagram. Such that, visibility of sexualized content is a co-produced outcome of interactions among creators, content, audience behaviour, algorithmic ranking, moderation tools, and monetization mechanisms (sponsored posts, subscription based content). Creators adopt provocative poses, framing, and thumbnails, audiences provide engagement indicators, algorithms optimize for these indicators, and commercial actors reward visibility. The pattern cannot be explained by either the algorithm or the creators alone, both function within a larger sociotechnical assemblage.

Tactics utilised by creators to increase engagement and visibility on their posts include use of framing, lighting, and camera angles to maximize suggestiveness while staying within visible community standards. Thumbnails frequently overstate sexual cues in comparison to the rest of the content, serving as attention-grabbing clickbait (72% of the total 150). A clear monetization strategy that takes advantage of platform moderation loopholes is demonstrated by the existence of links and URL-masking techniques used by subscription-model based creators (OnlyFans, Fansly). Gendered aesthetics play a key role in the engineering and exploitation of visibility, as evidenced by the gender skew (Figure 1; 77.34% female creators of 150 posts), the dominance of female bodies featured across categories, and the lack of male-featured posts under explicit searches.

The findings bring to attention some practical considerations for the platform. First, platform governance needs greater transparency and better alignment of incentives. There needs to be an independent audit of content recommendation metrics and advertising logics to assess whether they systematically advantage sexualized content. Second, moderation and design interventions should explicitly address visual baiting practices, including implementation of clearer thumbnail standards, age-verification mechanisms for Explore Page recommendations, and stricter enforcement against surrogate promotion that routes users to paid adult services. Third, creator-oriented interventions, such as education on safer monetization strategies and the provision of clearer, more accessible policy guidance, may reduce creators' reliance on borderline visual provocation.

The findings of this study are interpreted with several limitations. First, the analysis relies on a finite and predefined set of keywords. While this approach did allow systematic comparison across categories, it does not capture the full range of searches or user behaviours that shape the Explore page. Second, all content was coded by the researcher, which introduces the possibility of interpretation bias. A structured coding framework was applied, but assessments of bareness, provocation, and suggestiveness inevitably involve subjective judgment. Third, Instagram's recommendation algorithm is opaque. The study cannot directly observe or verify internal ranking mechanisms, limiting the ability to make causal claims about why specific content was surfaced. Fourth, the algorithm itself is dynamic and continuously updated. The patterns observed here may shift as Instagram adjusts its systems, policies, or interface. Finally, the study represents a snapshot in time. The findings capture a specific moment in the platform's operation and should not be read as a permanent or fixed condition.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes meaningful insight by combining quantitative measurement with qualitative interpretation and established theoretical frameworks. The alignment of numerical patterns, documented creator strategies, and theory-based analysis supports the central conclusion. Sexualized visibility on Instagram is systematically created by the interplay of algorithmic incentives and creator adaptation, rather than happening by accident.

The idea of algorithmically mediated provocation is supported overall by the mixed quantitative and qualitative evidence: platform incentives and creator strategies interact to make sexualized visuals structurally visible. Actor-Network Theory describes how

agency is divided among human and non-human actors, while Manufacturing Consent explains why engagement-driven logics magnify such content. Coordinated technical audits, policy reform, and ongoing attention to the dispersed methods of visibility production and monetization on platforms such as Instagram will be necessary to address the public-interest issues this raises.

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