HOW DOES THE INSTAGRAM EXPLORE PAGE WORK?

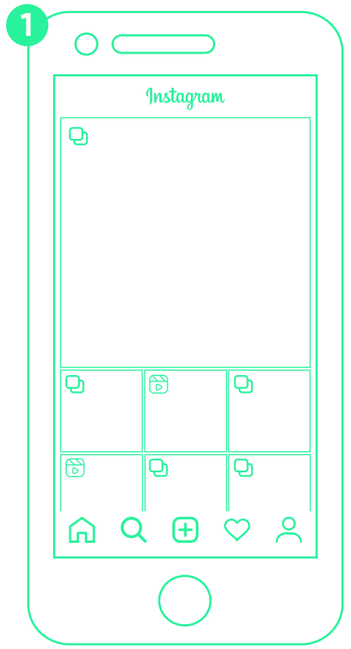
On social media, you no longer see only photos and posts from people you follow. Both Facebook and Instagram are actively pushing to show posts from accounts you do not yet follow. On Instagram, this is done through the **'Explore' page**.

This page appears when you click on the magnifying glass icon in the application. According to Instagram, over half of all Instagram users visit this page daily. For influencers and businesses, being visible on this Explore page is particularly important, as it is the best way to connect with new followers. But what about users? How does Instagram determine which content is **attractive** to you? What **AI technology** determines what your Explore page looks like? And do you have a say in it yourself?

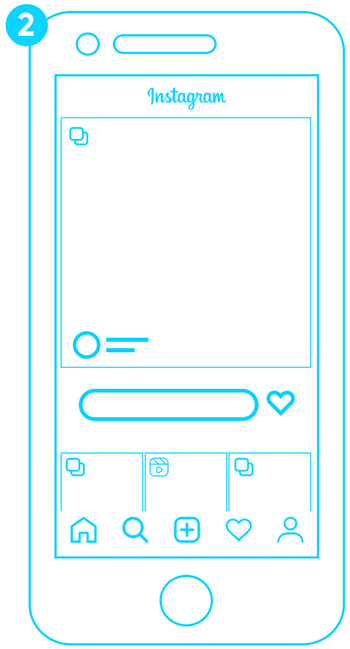
Recommender systems

To determine which posts are shown on your Explore page, Instagram uses at least **four different recommendation systems**. A recommendation system is **a collection of algorithms** that creates a personal selection for you from the different posts on Instagram and displays them in your feed.

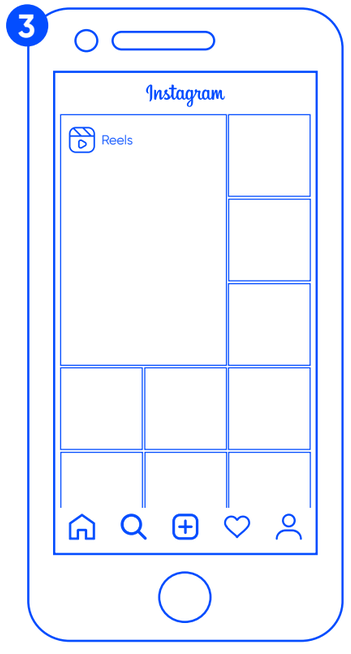
These recommendation systems select items based on **predictions**. They try to predict how attractive you will find the items using various **signals** from your behaviour on the app.



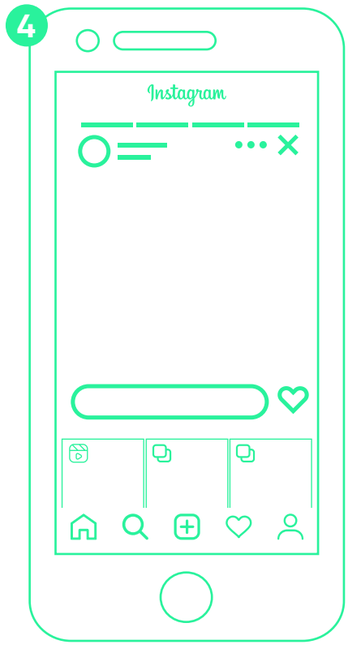
Recommender 1 suggests content such as **photos and reels** and displays them as blocks in Explore.



When you click on one of those blocks, **recommender 2** displays **related content** in a sequence that you see when you scroll past the post you clicked on.



Recommender 3 shows the large, rectangular content in Explore, which consists of **reels**.



When you click on one of those reels, **recommender 4** shows the **related content** you see when you scroll **past the reel** you clicked on.

Predictions with signals

Instagram uses different types of signals to make predictions. These include **explicit signals** (e.g. liking something or posting a comment) and **implicit signals** (e.g. viewing a post). Usually, several of these **signals are combined** to arrive at a prediction. Moreover, **not only your own behaviour** plays a role, but how others reacted to these kinds of posts is also taken into account. The combination of different predictions then determines how likely you are to find the content attractive.

For example, it predicts **how likely you are to share a post**. To calculate this, it looks at how old the post is, how many times people have seen a thumbnail of the post and how many thumbnails of other posts you have already seen, among other things.

A number of predictions are also made for reel recommendations. These include **calculating how likely you are to watch the reel from start to finish**. To predict that, it takes into account how many posts you clicked on and how many of them were reels.

Predicting whether you will share a post or watch a reel in full seems fairly obvious when trying to predict how appealing you find a post. But it goes a step further. For instance, Instagram is also trying to **predict the likelihood of you saving the audio of a reel**. For this, it looks at how many times you have saved a reel's audio in the past and what the last 100 audio tracks are that you have saved from reels. Instagram then also tries to **predict the chances of you using that audio** in a reel you create yourself.

Win-win-win?

Perhaps at first glance these seem like meaningless predictions, but it is important to Instagram that the music offered in reels is used by many people. It is **the promise that your music will be used** that convinces artists to make their music available for this feature. That way, artists get their music to listeners, users can choose from an extensive audio catalogue and the social media platform becomes **more attractive** to all. Win for the artists and win for the end users, which ultimately means the biggest win for Instagram.

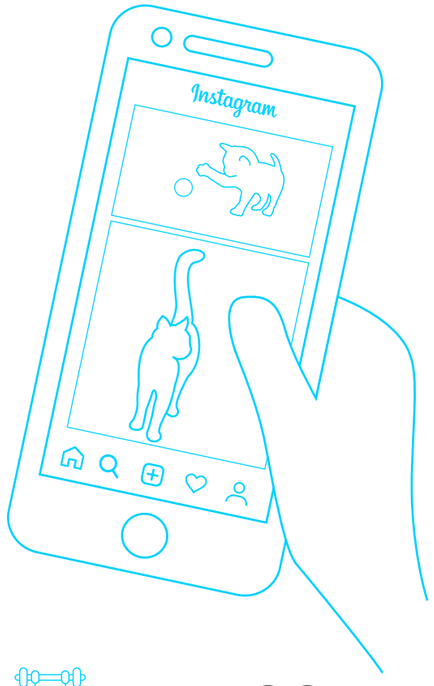
Slave of the algorithm?

Can you control which posts you get to see or are you completely subject to the whims of the algorithm? Besides the explicit and implicit signals Instagram uses to calculate the attractiveness of a post, as an end user you can also exercise **more control** over what you get to see. For instance, you can select '**Not interested**' for each post. When you select this option, the ranking score for these types of posts will temporarily go down.

But what is undoubtedly most successful in shaping your own Explore page is **being conscious** of the numerous signals used. This way, you can **adjust your behaviour** when there is certain content you would like to see pop up in your Explore page. For example, are you looking for more DIY tutorials? Watch similar reels to the end or leave a comment. Or would you like to see a few less cats in your feed? Then try not clicking on posts featuring these four-legged friends for a while.

Want to know more?

Are you **curious** about how other AI systems work on Instagram or Facebook? Or what data is being used? Since the introduction of the **Digital Services Act** - a new European law - big internet companies like Meta are obliged to be more **transparent** about why you get to see certain content (or not). In Meta's Transparency Center, you can therefore now find a complete(r) overview of the algorithms and data used by Meta.



This brAInfood was developed by Annelien Smets and Brett Binst, as part of the SBO project Serendipity Engine (FWO). They relied on information from Meta's Transparency Center.

Knowledge Centre Data & Society (2023). How does the Instagram Explore page work? brAInfood of the Knowledge Centre Data & Society. Brussels: Knowledge Centre Data & Society.

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