

# "I Want to Hear Things From the Other Side": Designing for Content Diversity and User Control on Instagram Reels

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**Abstract:** Short video platforms have revolutionised digital media consumption through algorithmic personalisation, but they risk creating filter bubbles and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. This paper investigates user perceptions of algorithmic personalisation and filter bubbles on Instagram Reels, an underexplored platform with a significant global user base. Using a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, interviews, and prototype evaluations, the study identifies critical user concerns, such as repetitive content, perceived manipulation, and limited content diversity. The research introduces a user-centred prototype with tools for algorithmic transparency and customisation, enabling users to manage their content experience and mitigate filter bubbles. Iterative testing with the System Usability Scale (SUS) and Think Aloud methods demonstrates the prototype's effectiveness. By addressing challenges like ideological polarisation, psychological fatigue, and ethical concerns, this study contributes to broader societal discussions and provides actionable insights for designing inclusive digital environments that prioritise user autonomy, transparency, and diverse perspectives.

**Keywords:** Algorithmic Personalisation, Instagram Reels, Filter Bubbles, Content Diversity, User-Centred Design

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## 1. Introduction

Short-form video platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts have rapidly reshaped online media consumption, fuelled by highly personalised recommendation algorithms (Boeker and Urman, 2022). These systems analyse extensive behavioural data to curate continuous, engaging feeds that encourage prolonged use (Zhao, 2021; Chen, 2023). While this personalisation increases relevance and entertainment value, it simultaneously raises concerns about reduced exposure to diverse viewpoints. Filter bubbles emerge when users repeatedly encounter content that reinforces their existing beliefs, narrowing perspectives and limiting opportunities for critical engagement (Sunstein, 2007; Pariser, 2011; Li et al., 2021).

Personalised algorithms on short video platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels limit content diversity by reinforcing filter bubbles (Gao, Liu and Gao, 2023). Designed to maximise engagement, they confine users to narrow perspectives, intensified by the addictive, auto-playing nature of short-form content that repeatedly exposes users to similar material (Li et al., 2021; Huang, Hu and Zhang, 2022). Such narrowing has wider societal consequences, including ideological polarisation and reduced civic engagement (Chitra and Musco, 2020). Yet, despite recognition of these risks, users lack accessible tools to diversify their feeds, highlighting the need for intuitive, user-centred interventions.

Research examining short-form video platforms has focused predominantly on TikTok, leaving Instagram Reels comparatively underexplored despite its significant global user base. Moreover, existing work tends to treat personalisation as a technical problem rather than an experiential one, with limited attention to users' own perceptions, folk theories or desires for control (Sukiennik, Gao and Li, 2024). This presents an opportunity to investigate how users understand and negotiate algorithmic curation, and to design solutions grounded in their actual needs.

This study addresses these gaps by examining user experiences of personalisation, content diversity and perceived control on Instagram Reels. It is guided by three research questions:

- **RQ1:** How do users perceive content diversity and the extent to which they feel confined within filter bubbles?
- **RQ2:** How transparent do users perceive the recommendation system to be, and what improvements do they desire?
- **RQ3:** What features or tools do users want to enhance content diversity and mitigate filter bubbles?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Overview of Short-Form Video Platforms

Short-form video (SFV) platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels have rapidly transformed digital content consumption through highly engaging, short, user-generated videos (Menon, 2022). These platforms attract users for entertainment, social connection, self-expression, and information seeking (Zhang, Wu and Liu, 2019; Wang, 2022). Their design emphasises continuous scrolling, autoplay, and frictionless interaction, which encourages habitual use and prolonged engagement (Li *et al.*, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2023).

A defining feature of SFV platforms is the dominance of algorithmically curated feeds rather than follower-based content selection (Cheng and Li, 2024; Molem, Makri and McKay, 2024). Unlike traditional social platforms that rely heavily on follower networks, SFV platforms primarily surface content through algorithmic recommendation systems that respond to observed user behaviour rather than explicit user choices (Mou, Xu and Du, 2021). As a result, users are largely exposed to content selected by opaque recommendation processes, making algorithms central to shaping visibility, participation, and content exposure.

### 2.2 Algorithmic Personalisation

Algorithmic personalisation is foundational to the operation of SFV platforms. Recommendation systems analyse behavioural signals such as watch time, likes, shares, comments, and viewing history to generate highly individualised content feeds (Boeker and Urman, 2022; Kang and Lou, 2022). These processes operate continuously and largely invisibly to users. Across social media, personalisation is driven by implicit behavioural data rather than explicit user instructions, limiting users' ability to meaningfully influence their content environment (Swart, 2021). While personalisation enhances perceived content relevance, research highlights tensions between algorithmic control and user autonomy (Kim, 2016; Nagulendra and Vassileva, 2016; Saurwein and Spencer-Smith, 2021). When users lack insight into how recommendations are generated, trust in the system may diminish, particularly when content curation feels intrusive or manipulative (Nagulendra and Vassileva, 2016). The dominance of algorithmic decision-making therefore raises concerns about transparency, agency, and user control within highly curated content environments.

### 2.3 Filter Bubbles and Echo Chambers

Concerns surrounding algorithmic personalisation often centre on filter bubbles and echo chambers. Filter bubbles describe conditions where users are repeatedly exposed to content aligned with their past behaviours and preferences, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives (Pariser, 2011). Echo chambers further illustrate how selective exposure intensifies homogeneity and group polarisation (Sunstein, 2007).

Empirical studies on TikTok, Douyin, and similar SFV platforms demonstrate that their recommendation systems can produce homogeneous information environments and reinforce ideological alignment (Li *et al.*, 2022; Chen, 2023). During politically salient periods, such as election campaigns, these systems have been shown to generate ideologically consistent feeds that contribute to polarisation and toxic discourse (Ruhyat and Wahidin, 2024). While some scholars caution against overstating the strength of filter bubble effects (Seargeant and Tagg, 2019), there is broad agreement that the immersive, fast-paced, and algorithmically centralised design of SFV platforms introduces distinct vulnerabilities compared to network-driven platforms (Boeker and Urman, 2022; Chen, 2023).

Filter bubbles have also been linked to broader societal risks, including reduced cognitive flexibility, diminished exposure to counter-attitudinal information, and weakening of democratic deliberation (Bozdog and Van Den Hoven, 2015; Kitchens, Johnson and Gray, 2020).

### 2.4 Gaps and Motivations

Despite extensive research on algorithmic personalisation and filter bubbles, significant gaps remain. Existing studies predominantly examine platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, where users retain some control through subscriptions and social networks, leaving SFV platforms like Instagram Reels underexplored. Prior work often focuses on risks such as addiction and polarisation (Zhang, Wu and Liu, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2021), but rarely investigates how users perceive algorithmic curation or what design interventions they find meaningful. Furthermore, proposed solutions such as transparency features or media literacy interventions often lack empirical design validation and practical implementation strategies (Nagulendra and Vassileva, 2016;

Chromik *et al.*, 2019). This study addresses this gap by examining user perceptions and translating them into user-centred design solutions that enhance content diversity, transparency, and control.

### 3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design to investigate user experiences of algorithmic personalisation, content diversity, and perceived filter bubbles on Instagram Reels. A sequential explanatory approach was adopted, beginning with an online survey to capture broad patterns in user perceptions, followed by semi-structured interviews to explore these findings in depth. The survey used Likert-scale questions to assess perceptions of content relevance, diversity, and algorithmic transparency, and was completed by 73 UK-based short-form video users. The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with 10 highly engaged Instagram Reels users, conducted remotely and lasting 30–40 minutes. These interviews provided deeper insight into users’ beliefs, emotional responses, and expectations regarding algorithmic curation.

Based on the empirical findings, a prototype was developed to address identified user needs around content diversity, transparency, and control. The prototype was evaluated through usability testing using the Think Aloud method and the System Usability Scale (SUS). Ten participants took part in the evaluation, including five interview participants and five new users, enabling both continuity and fresh perspectives.

Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while interview and usability data were analysed through inductive thematic analysis. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, informed consent was secured, and all data were anonymised and stored securely. This approach enabled a rigorous examination of both user perceptions and the usability of proposed design interventions.

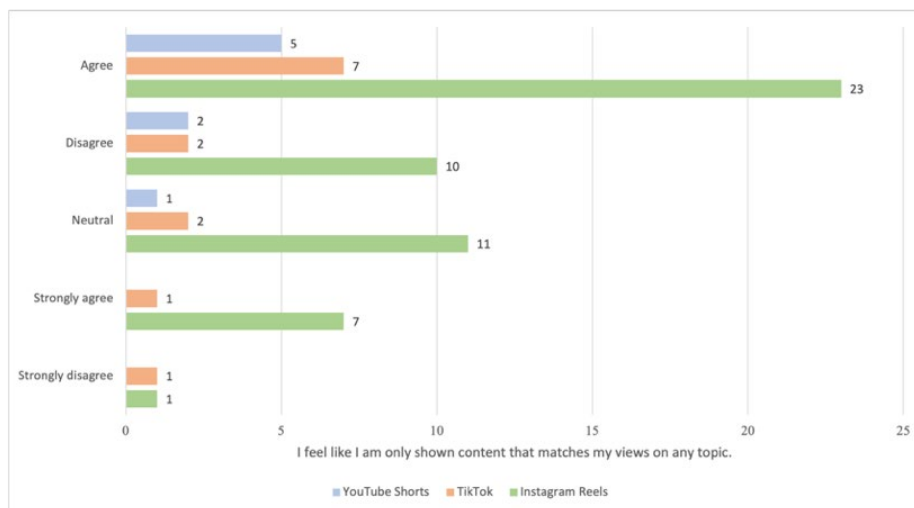
### 4. Research Findings

This research focuses on Instagram Reels, as the majority of survey respondents (52 out of 73) identified Reels as their primary short-form video platform, ensuring that findings reflect platform-specific user experiences.

#### 4.1 RQ1: Content Relevance, Diversity and Filter Bubbles

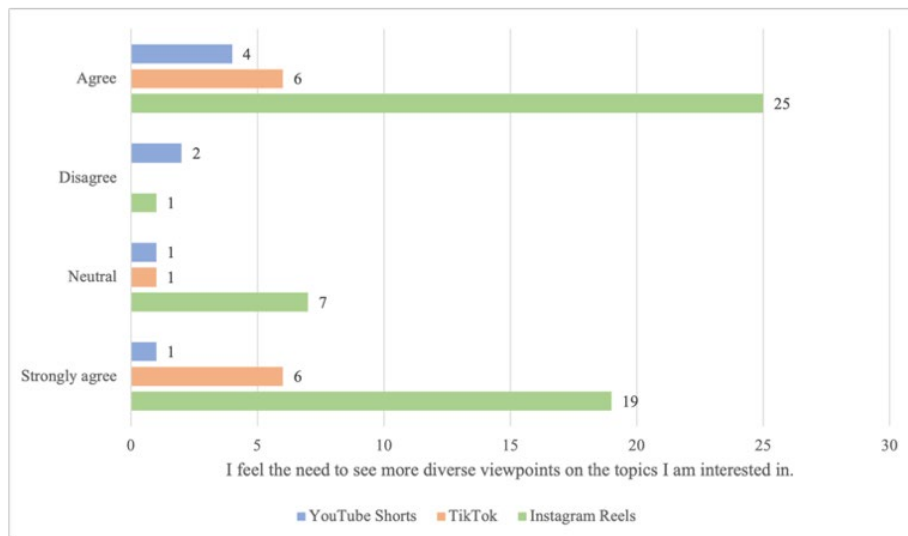
##### 4.1.1 Survey Findings

Survey responses indicate that Instagram Reels is highly successful at delivering content that feels personally relevant. Among Reels users, 40 of 52 (76%) agreed that “the content suggested to me is usually relevant to my interests.” No Reels user disagreed with this statement.



**Figure 1: User Perception of Content Homogeneity Across Individual SFV Platforms**

However, this relevance is accompanied by a strong sense of content homogeneity. When asked whether they felt “only shown content that matches my views on any topic,” 30 of 52 Reels users (57%) agreed, while 11 (21%) were neutral and 11 (21%) disagreed.



**Figure 2: User Desire for Diverse Viewpoints Across Individual SFV Platforms**

At the same time, there is a clear demand for greater diversity. When asked if they would like to see more diverse viewpoints on topics of interest, 44 of 52 Reels users (85%) agreed or strongly agreed. This combination of strong perceived relevance, recognition of homogeneity, and a high desire for diversity captures a central tension in users' experiences with Reels: the platform "works" in terms of personalisation, but may do so at the cost of exposure to alternative perspectives.

The survey also highlights the emotional and cognitive consequences of repetitive content. A majority of Reels users, 28 of 52 (54%), agreed that they feel "overwhelmed by seeing the same type of content repeatedly". Feelings of manipulation are similarly pronounced: 34 of 52 (65%) Reels users agreed that they "sometimes feel manipulated by the content recommendations," with only 11 (21%) disagreeing.

#### 4.1.2 Interview Findings

The interviews deepen this picture by illustrating how participants navigate the trade-off between relevance and diversity in their everyday use of Reels.

One user explained that the feed "adapts to my current interests... When I pick up a new interest, it shows up soon" (P1), while another noted that Reels is "pretty good at giving you what you want to see or at least what's going to catch your interest for five seconds before you scroll down" (P8). For many, this adaptiveness reduces effort and makes the experience feel tailored and engaging.

However, the same mechanism also leads to over-personalisation. Several participants reported that a single click or fleeting curiosity could spiral into an unwanted stream of similar videos. One participant described how "when I click on something just because it sticks out, it starts showing me more of that stuff even though I am not particularly interested in them... It starts multiplying that content which I wouldn't ideally want" (P3). Another observed that their feed became so narrowly focused that "it gets too personalised to me, that I'm only seeing like vegan food. But then I don't mind seeing people cook other kinds of food and I don't mind learning about that" (P5).

When Reels becomes monotonous, some users feel compelled to leave the platform entirely to regain variety. As P3 put it, "eventually you want some sort of variety, at which point I end up going to different apps, like YouTube, just to have some variety." These accounts echo the survey findings on repetition and suggest that over-relevance can undermine long-term engagement.

Participants also recognised the presence of filter bubbles, particularly around political content. One user commented, "I've heard of this term called social media filter bubble, and I feel like that happens to me... my Instagram knows which political side I lean to. They will just give me content from creators on the same political side as me" (P5). Another noted that "if you are a supporter of one side, the algorithm will show you what you want to see. It will not show you the good parts of the other side, and even if it does, it's gonna make it look bad" (P9). These reflections suggest that Reels is not only reinforcing existing views but may also skew how opposing positions are presented.

Participants were clear that exposure to different viewpoints is not only desirable but necessary. One user criticised the lack of balance: *"You're constantly fed information that just agrees with you, and that's not realistic... If you want a platform to be realistic as well, then it should also expose you to different viewpoints"* (P6). Another linked this to empathy: *"We just keep getting fed the same thing we think, so our views become stronger and we start to think, oh, this is what everyone is thinking... it's bad for everyone because we're not empathising with the other side"* (P5). For P7, the motivation was also educational: *"Sometimes I want to hear things from the other side. I think even though it's Instagram you would like to learn something from the time you spend. Otherwise, you're just really wasting your time."*

#### 4.1.3 Synthesis for RQ1

For RQ1, the findings show that Instagram Reels is experienced as both highly relevant and problematically narrow. Survey data demonstrate that most Reels users find the content aligned with their interests, yet a majority also perceive homogeneity and report feeling overwhelmed and manipulated. Interviews reveal that the algorithm adapts quickly to emerging interests but tends to over-amplify them, generating repetitive feeds that reinforce existing views and, at times, shape offline decisions. Crucially, participants explicitly connect these dynamics to filter bubbles and express a strong desire for more diverse and balanced viewpoints. These tensions directly motivate the need for design interventions that preserve relevance while actively supporting diversity and critical engagement.

## 4.2 RQ2: User Perceptions of Algorithmic Transparency

### 4.2.1 Survey Findings

The survey shows a strong appetite among Reels users for greater insight into how recommendations are produced. When asked whether they would like to know more about how the platform decides what content to show, 48 of 52 Reels users (92%) agreed or strongly agreed. At the same time, users already believe that their behaviour influences what they see: 50 of 52 (96%) agreed that their viewing history affects recommendations, and 51 of 52 (98%) agreed that their activity (likes, comments, shares) is used to tailor the feed. This indicates that despite strong beliefs about behavioural influence, the underlying logic of recommendations remains opaque.

### 4.2.2 Interview Findings

Interviews confirm that transparency is closely tied to feelings of control and trust. For some, understanding the algorithm is explicitly framed as a way to reclaim agency. One participant remarked that if they knew how recommendations were generated, *"then I wouldn't feel like it [the algorithm] has so much control... I would feel like I have more control over my algorithm, which would make me feel better, because it's like, oh, this technology does not control my life"* (P5).

However, transparency is not unambiguously positive. P4 described feeling "torn," explaining that full insight into how Instagram has profiled them might generate anxiety: *"I think at some point I'd be very anxious if I get to know how... they've made my profile and what they are using it for. I'm also torn because I'm using this for entertainment, and if it stops being fun, that's a problem."*

Participants also raised concerns about fairness and the possible use of sensitive attributes in recommendation processes. P10 stated, *"I want to know what criteria they are using to show me content because I do not want content based on my skin colour or income... I want to get the content that the rich are getting and also the very poor are getting."*

Participants proposed different forms of transparency. Some favoured structural openness, such as following X's decision to open-source its recommendation algorithm so *"if something suspicious was there, you'd probably know"* (P8). Others preferred simple, explanation-driven mechanisms, similar to Facebook's "why am I seeing this?" feature: *"I would like to see what they are thinking... like with Facebook ads, where you see why you're seeing an ad. You can then have more control on how to adjust those criteria"* (P9).

### 4.2.3 Synthesis for RQ2

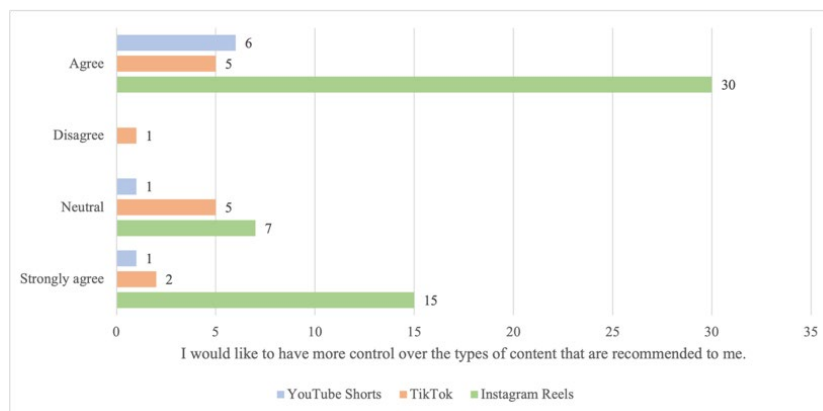
For RQ2, the findings suggest that users already hold strong beliefs about how their behaviour shapes the feed, but still feel that the underlying algorithm is a "black box." They want transparency that is accessible and

actionable, without making the system feel overly technical or undermining its entertainment value. These insights inform the design requirement that any proposed solution should include lightweight, user-facing mechanisms that explain recommendations and surface the presence of filtering, without overwhelming the user.

### 4.3 RQ3: Desired Tools and Features for Content Diversity and Control

#### 4.3.1 Survey Findings

Survey data indicate a clear preference among Reels users for tools that enhance their control over recommendations. When asked if they would like more control over the types of content recommended to them, 45 of 52 Reels users (87%) agreed or strongly agreed, and none disagreed. Similarly, 39 of 52 (75%) expressed interest in customising settings to explore new topics they had not previously watched. These results show that users do not simply want to understand the algorithm, they want concrete, usable mechanisms to shape it.



**Figure 3: User Preference for Greater Control Over Recommended Content on SFV Platforms**

#### 4.3.2 Interview Findings

Interviews reveal a range of concrete ideas for how such tools might work in practice, with a strong focus on mitigating filter bubbles and managing content diversity.

Participants proposed features that would deliberately “break” overly narrow recommendation loops.

P3 proposed a “temperature slider” to set the level of randomness in the feed: *“I would want to control my algorithm with a temperature slider... to set the amount of randomness that I would want my algorithm to generate.”*

Other participants suggested tools that explicitly surface when a filter bubble has formed. P10 imagined an option that *“constantly [lets] people know that they’re seeing a particular content because it goes with their algorithm... [and gives them] the option to turn that off and see what they get. The purpose of that button is to mainly let people know that they are in a filter bubble.”* This combines transparency with control: making the bubble visible and providing an immediate way to step outside it.

#### 4.3.3 Synthesis for RQ3

For RQ3, the findings show that Reels users are not asking to abandon personalisation; they are asking for ways to shape it. Survey results demonstrate strong demand for more control and the ability to deliberately explore unfamiliar topics. Interview accounts translate this into specific design directions: adjustable diversity settings, mechanisms to reset or broaden the feed, visual or textual cues indicating when the user is in a filter bubble, and controls that are visible and lightweight rather than hidden and complex. Together, these insights underpin the design rationale for a prototype that foregrounds user agency over both the breadth and intensity of recommended content.

#### 4.3.4 Prototype Design and Evaluation

The final prototype was designed with Figma<sup>1</sup> to address key user needs identified in the findings, namely increasing content diversity, improving algorithmic transparency, and enhancing user control over recommendations.

### 4.4 Key Design Solutions

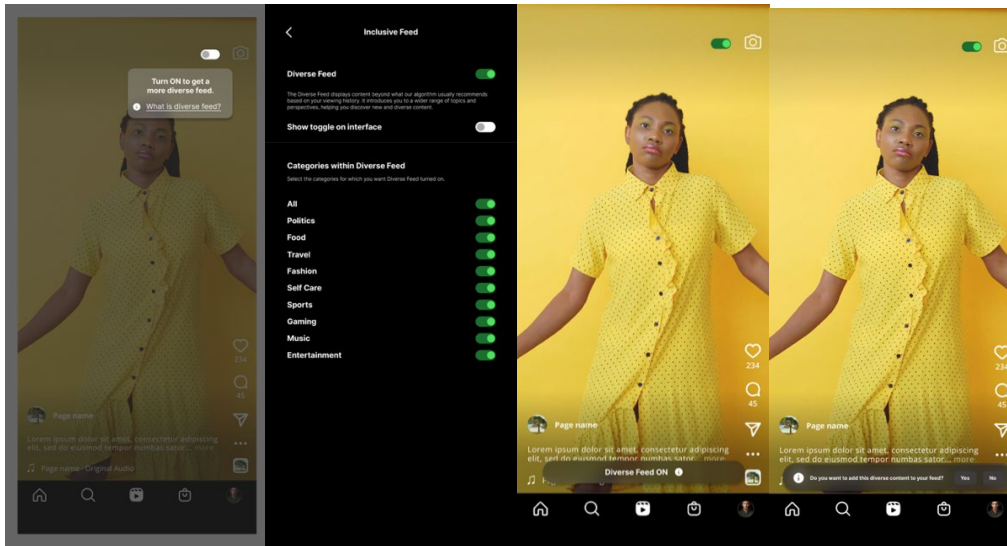


Figure 4-7: High Fidelity Mock-up of Diverse Feed

The first core feature is the **Diverse Feed**. A visible toggle is placed at the top of the Reels interface, allowing users to switch between a standard personalised feed and a more diverse feed. An onboarding prompt explains the purpose of this feature on first use. Users can also enable or disable diversity at a category level, such as Politics, Food, and Travel. When unfamiliar content appears, a prompt asks whether users wish to add it to their feed, giving them direct influence over future recommendations. Users can turn the feature off at any time.

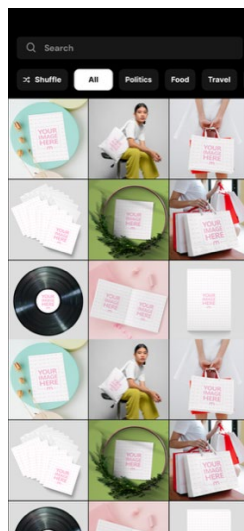
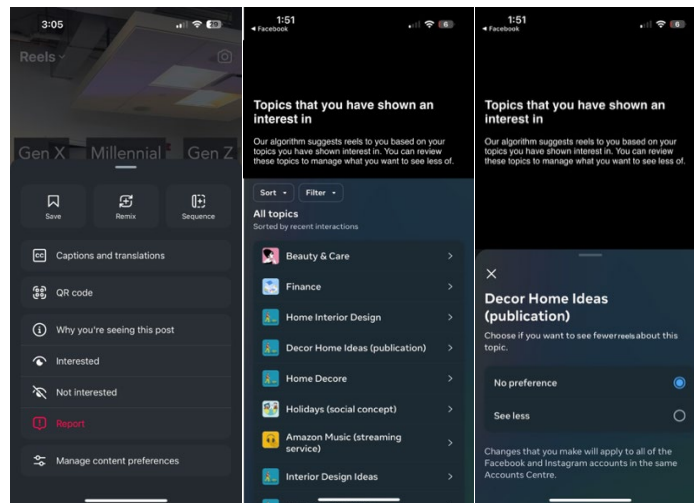


Figure 8: High Fidelity Mock-up of Discover Content

The second feature is **Discover Content**, designed to support active exploration. A horizontal list of topic categories is positioned below the search bar, enabling fast navigation into new subject areas. A Shuffle button

<sup>1</sup> **Animated Instagram Reel Mockup with Video** by Fabian Schneider, used under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Modifications were made to include new UI elements to create a prototype for enhancing content diversity in Instagram reels.

allows users to refresh content instantly to escape repetitive recommendations. A “Recommended for You” section combines trending and interest-based topics to balance familiarity with novelty.



**Figure 9-11: High Fidelity Mock-up of Algorithmic Transparency**

The third feature addresses **Algorithmic Transparency**. A “Why you are seeing this post” option is added to each reel, showing users which factors influenced a recommendation. A separate page displays all topics shaping the user’s feed, allowing users to mark topics as “No Preference” or “See Less”.

#### 4.5 Evaluation

The prototype was evaluated using Think Aloud sessions followed by SUS questionnaires. Participants completed tasks covering all three features.

Overall, users found the Diverse Feed toggle easy to locate and valued the ability to enable diversity at a category level. The prompt to add diverse content was seen as empowering, with one participant stating that it felt like they had a direct say in shaping future recommendations. The Discover Content features were well received, especially the Shuffle button and visible topic categories, which encouraged exploration. Some participants expressed concern about how Shuffle affected the algorithm, indicating a need for clearer messaging.

The Algorithmic Transparency feature was positively received for explaining why content appeared. However, some users requested more detailed explanations and easier ways to manage multiple interests, such as bulk editing.

The **average SUS score was 77**, which corresponds to **good usability**. Higher scores reflected appreciation for increased control and transparency. Lower scores were associated with requests for more granular diversity controls, concerns about algorithm impact, and the manual effort required to manage preferences.

The evaluation indicates that the prototype successfully addressed key user needs around content diversity, transparency, and control. While the core concepts were validated, improvements are needed in clarity, efficiency of controls, and flexibility of personalisation to further strengthen usability.

### 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined user perceptions of algorithmic personalisation and filter bubbles on Instagram Reels, with a focus on content diversity, transparency, and user control. Findings reveal a clear tension between perceived content relevance and dissatisfaction with content homogeneity. While most users reported that Instagram Reels effectively aligns recommendations with their interests, many also felt confined within narrow content loops that limited exposure to diverse viewpoints. These experiences were particularly salient in relation to political and social content, reinforcing concerns around echo chambers and reduced critical engagement.

Survey and interview findings consistently highlighted a strong desire for greater transparency and control over content curation. Users expressed discomfort with opaque recommendation processes and a sense of manipulation, motivating the need for design interventions that surface algorithmic logic and enable users to actively manage their feeds. In response, this research proposed user-centred features aimed at increasing

content diversity and algorithmic transparency, which were positively received during prototype evaluation and usability testing.

This work contributes to existing literature by extending research on filter bubbles to Instagram Reels, an underexplored short-form video platform. It further contributes to HCI by combining empirical insight into user experiences of algorithmic personalisation on Instagram Reels with design knowledge derived from a research prototype that explores transparency and user control in Instagram Reels (Wobbrock, 2012). In interpreting these contributions, it is also important to acknowledge constraints that shape how such design interventions could operate in practice. Platforms such as Instagram are optimised around engagement-driven metrics and advertising revenue (Raffoul *et al.*, 2023), which may limit incentives to foreground features that disrupt personalised feeds or encourage reduced or more reflective consumption. Alongside these platform-level constraints, the study is constrained by sample size and self-reported data, but it demonstrates the value of design-led approaches in addressing algorithmic bias and promoting more balanced content experiences on short-form video platforms.

Future research could extend this work by evaluating these features in live platform settings to examine long-term behavioural effects on content consumption and viewpoint diversity. Longitudinal studies could also explore whether increased transparency and control alter trust in recommendation systems over time. More broadly, this work points to the need for closer collaboration between HCI research and platform design to ensure that algorithmic systems support not only engagement, but informed, diverse, and reflective media experiences.

## Ethics Declaration

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the University of Nottingham's Research Ethics Committee. All study phases, including the survey, semi-structured interviews, and prototype evaluation, were conducted in accordance with approved ethical guidelines.

## AI Declaration

AI tools were used in a limited capacity to support language refinement, editing, and content reduction during the writing process. All research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and final decisions regarding content were carried out solely by the author.

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