# Using Instagram for Visibility: A Digital Ethnographic Study of Algorithmic Mediation on Digital Illustrators

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**Preface**

**ABSTRACT**

Both the digital artsphere and digital art marketplace are rapidly evolving. It is moving onto different platforms online, and in doing so it reaches a substantial amount of audiences. Described as a phenomena that requires anticipation, the progress of digital art creators on social media is one to further look into. One of the platforms that continues to cater to digital art is Instagram. Being a visually centered social media platform, digital artists such as digital illustrators are using it to be showcasing their creations. This study particularly addresses digital illustrators. With a significant number of digital illustrators already being on Instagram, the research aimed to understand how they are using the platform to gain visibility. Instagram's algorithms play a substantial role in how users on the platform are behaving. However, with Meta choosing to not disclose much about the platform's algorithms, users have developed an understanding of how certain algorithms play a role in their lives. A concept Bishop (2019) coined as "algorithmic gossip". What were some of the algorithmic gossip digital illustrators participated in? And, how is it affecting their practices on the platform? This research was conducted through a mixed method approach. Firstly, by conducting a digital ethnography of ten chosen digital illustrators on Instagram, several emerging themes and insights were identified. The themes were later incorporated into topics and questions for five in-depth interviews with particular digital illustrators on Instagram. For further discussion and comparison, a computational network analysis of one of the digital illustrator's YouTube channels was carried out. This revealed differences in the strategies used by illustrators on Instagram and YouTube. Results of the study suggests that digital illustrators on Instagram have taken a solopreneurship approach by acting within their own jurisdiction to ensure their profiles are more client-facing rather than personal pages. Moreover, while the digital illustrators perceive Instagram's algorithms to be arbitrary and problematic, practices such as consistently posting their creations, engaging with their audiences through the platform's affordances, and identifying or incorporating trends onto their art, are some of the main strategies they use to gain visibility.

KEYWORDS: digital art, digital illustrators, Instagram, social media, algorithmic mediation
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## 1. Introduction

Social media platforms and the content being shared by users on the platforms are increasingly moving from text to visual communication (Gupta, 2013 as quoted in Muñoz & Towner, 2017). One platform in particular, is visual based platform Instagram. Instagram is a photo-sharing

platform that markets itself as a medium where users are able to "transform an image into a memory to keep forever" (Lee et al. 2015). Upon Instagram's acquisition by Facebook – recently rebranded as "Meta" – for approximately $1 Billion in 2012 (BBC, 2012), Meta introduced developments over the years to further cater the needs of their users. Such users can be categorized into different online communities depending on their interests, engagements, and the other users they follow or interact with. Various online communities on Instagram represent a growing group in the marketplace where participants exchange information, services, products and other common interests (Bellavista et al., 2019).

This research focused on the community of digital illustrators on Instagram. The study looked into how digital illustrators use Instagram to grow their visibility on the platform. Visibility is a concept Dahlberg (2018) explains as a form of publicity associated with that of a public sphere. Digital illustrators are artists that have moved from the traditional means of illustration such as paper and pens, to more technology oriented methods of illustration with the likes of computers, tablets, or other digital applications (Caudill, 2014). The aim of this research was to gain an understanding into how digital illustrators on Instagram are using the means of the platform to gain visibility and reach their respective personal as well as monetary goals.

Manovich (2019) explains that users on Instagram are considered to be owners to the means of their cultural production. However, this is not limited to owning a mobile phone or other tools such as tablets or electric pens to create such content. Instead, a large part of the practice is also through the understanding of Instagram as a platform and the application of strategies to effectively reach individual goals. Instagram can also be considered a distinguishing method to reach a particular target audience, market products or services digitally, and increase brand visibility. Instagram's platform gives businesses and individuals the ability to provide a visually, engaging, and unique story about a brand (Alexander, 2018 as cited in Neelam, 2020).

However, with Meta's ongoing developments onto Instagram's complex algorithms and Instagram tools, such understanding varies amongst one user to another. Moreover, while a considerable amount of literature offers certain strategies for gaining visibility and building on marketing initiatives on social media for a plethora of different businesses, digital illustration art is a field where both personal creative goals as well as monetary goals differ between illustrators. Thus, the goals of creating art may not be generalized. On one hand, Instagram's features help provide an overview of insights, engagement, and means to sell goods directly from the app

(Instagram, 2021). On the other hand, a large clarification of how Instagram's algorithms run and details about the platform's updates that are being made remains inaccessible to the public. This leaves both a significant amount of speculation as to how the platform's algorithms work, and room to further understand how the users understand it to be.

Acquired by Google less than two years after its creation in 2005, YouTube has also ever since remained to be one of the largest visually based user-generated content sharing platforms on the internet. An environment that continues to be an increasingly established platform for popular culture as well as cultural exchanges (Arthurs, et al. 2018). The content being uploaded on YouTube gives an opportunity to attract a very broad range of audiences with different interests. Thus, the platform receives contributions from both amateur content creators and media companies alike (Xu, et al. 2016 as cited in Khan, 2017). Despite the platform's established relevance, much of how YouTube's algorithms perform are also inaccessible to the public. Bishop (2018) suggests that the various strategies used by content creators are influenced by their knowledge and assumptions about how the algorithm and other platform features work. Bishop's study concluded that a number of different practices and platform factors play a role in how content creators set up their videos. With YouTube and Instagram both being a popular visually based platform for content creators such as digital illustrators alike, this research provides a comparison of how digital illustrators on both platforms are gaining visibility. Moreover, social media is playing an increasingly influential role within various aspects of the digital artsphere. From providing the means to showcase art, produce art, and establishing new forms of art marketplaces. Sidorova (2019) explains that the role social media continues to have on digital art, is one that requires anticipation as well as comprehension.

To further comprehend how one perceives the platform's algorithms and uses the features and services provided in relation to expectations along with it, the main research question for this study is as follows: **How are digital illustrators using Instagram to gain visibility?** This research discusses the digital illustrator's algorithmic imaginary, a term Bucher (2017) explains is an understanding of how algorithms may work. This includes understanding the strategies used, obstacles faced, and an overall look into the digital illustrator's Instagram environment. Accompanying the research question, two-sub questions were established: **How do digital illustrators adapt to Instagram's features to their presence on the platform?** To answer the first sub-question, a digital ethnography was carried out to gain an early understanding into the

different concepts, phenomenon, and the environments of digital illustrators. Concepts and phenomena found through the ethnography were then incorporated into a question list. Five in-depth interviews with selected digital illustrators were then carried out. The illustrators chosen may be considered coming from a similar group based on a number of different features that include the type of digital illustrations they create, the similar goals they have, and the purposes their art aims to achieve.

A comparison with another visual-based platform, YouTube, was also discussed and researched upon. This was guided through the following second sub-question: **In what ways are digital illustrators using YouTube to increase their online visibility?** This sub-question was answered through one in-depth interview with a digital illustrator active on both YouTube and Instagram. Following this interview, information regarding specific keyword use and the different concepts used on YouTube as opposed to Instagram were taken into account. Furthermore, a network analysis using the software NodeXL was also conducted. Through NodeXL, a discussion about the commonly used hashtags or search queries used allowed for in-depth analysis. Further explanation can be found within the methods and results section of the paper.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The main goal of the research is to understand how digital illustrators are using Instagram to gain visibility. In this attempt, this includes a comparison to those of which are using YouTube. In order to further understand how they do so, it is important to first familiarize with who exactly digital illustrators are. This includes defining the concepts and features the two platforms offer, and the phenomena of building a perception towards how the algorithms work. Moreover, the theoretical framework helps bring insights gathered into not only how digital illustrators are using the platform to gain visibility, but into why they are doing so. Lastly, literature and theory being referred to in the following section helps provide a stronger understanding into the aspect of digital illustration art on social media in particular.

2.1 Digital illustration art

Illustration art has developed throughout the years to an extent where illustration designs are out of the scope for text explanation, and thus becoming further independent (Zhou and Xu, 2018). It is also through the introduction of new technology that illustration art has expanded into new environments. Zhou and Xu (2018) further point out that through social media platforms, illustration art has taken up unlimited opportunities not only to allow the illustrators themselves to reach new audiences, but to also get inspired from other illustrators alike. Furthermore, the development of technology has allowed illustrators to innovate and create new visual experiences for their audiences. According to Avila and Bailey (2016), the emerging genre of digitized art started in the 1950s, when a fascination into long exposure photography had begun. It was throughout the following years that most digitized art was mainly created by scientists and engineers who not only had the knowledge to use emerging computing technology, but also the access to it. By the 1980s and 90s, computer technology had become more accessible to the masses. Thus, replacing the perception of it being an art form produced by a few.

As a result, digital illustration is considered to be one of the most appealing art forms in this era (Yongqing, 2019). Moreover, the substantial amount of software and other digital tools that caters to digital illustration has introduced different forms of digital illustration. Yongqing (2019) emphasizes that despite possible constraints of certain programs, tools such as pressure pens and boards that replace the traditional pen and paper allow new originality. With originality being the main factor in digital illustration, illustrators create their own ways of using the tools they have, and as a result they implement personal visual codes or symbols that audiences are able to familiarize with.

Can digital art let alone digital illustrations created with the aid of technology be considered art? According to Crowther (2018), it can be. Crowther (2018) explains that it is through computers and a Postmodern naturalization of technology that a unique visual effect is achieved in different formats. That being said, digital illustrators are main creators that have grasped Postmodern naturalization technology.

2.1.1 Digital illustrators

Yet, who are digital illustrators? And how can one be distinguished from that of the traditional illustrator? The following paragraph intends to describe who digital illustrators are so that we could further familiarize with the main focus of study. According to Caudill (2014), digital illustrators are artists or content creators that have transitioned from the more traditional means of illustrations such as paper and pens, to more technology centered means of creating artwork. This includes the likes of software, computers, tablets, and other digital applications. For example, Altenburg (2012) points out how image editing software Photoshop CS5 and digital drawing tablet Wacom had changed the way digital art was to be created in a number of ways. One of which was the variety of different digital brushes and other editing tools made readily available to use. Second were the updates of how the tools could be used. For example, Altenburg (2012) explains how features such as realistic "pen tilting" or the different degrees of pressure one can put on the digital pens allowed for a plethora of different digital illustration styles. Furthermore, Sidorova (2019) emphasizes on the phenomena of witnessing an increase of digital illustrators and artists moving towards online platforms. Not only does the researcher explain the implications it has on the development of digital art styles, but also in how the digital art marketplace adapts. To further discuss the digital art marketplace, we first turn to comprehending the general idea of entrepreneurship on social media platforms.

2.2 Entrepreneurship on social media

Throughout the years, businesses and entrepreneurs have come to terms that social connectivity was a key aspect to marketing their products or services. With resources such as fast-paced communication methods, real-time analytics, and other performance measurement tools, entrepreneurs are continuing to learn the true potential advantages of social media as a marketing tool to optimize their presence within a public sphere (Geho et al., 2012) As social media platforms provide the means for their users to have access to tools that help them in their respective endeavors, entrepreneurs have been exploiting the functionalities to manage their business activities that range from marketing to selling services or goods (Alawan et al., 2017 as quoted in Olanrewaju et al., 2020).

Jagongo and Kinyua (2013) emphasizes on the importance of entrepreneurs to utilize the

social media platforms they are on to increase worthiness, cultivate partnerships, and to also increase their contact with their audiences and partners. Furthermore, entrepreneurship encompasses a number of different factors. Two of which Belt et al. (2015), explains are opportunity-seeking activities and management advantage-seeking activities. It is through the combination of the two entities that the practices entrepreneurs take in not only creating new business opportunities but to also create new strategies in the process of doing so (Belt et al. 2015)

2.2.1 Solopreneurship

How can we differentiate a solopreneur to that of an entrepreneur? On the contrary, Belt et al. (2015) defines solopreneurs as a type of entrepreneur. The researcher elaborates that solopreneurs can be considered individuals who run their respective businesses alone. Doing so, solopreneurs not only analyze and work in their environments, but they could also have a significant influence on their surrounding reality. That being said, while some believe that small enterprise ownership grants greater autonomy, the researchers emphasize on the aspect of autonomy as a reason for preferring self-employment. Taking self-drive and the ability to move within fast-paced environments, Gratton (2011) as cited in Belt et al. (2015) suggests that being a solopreneur is an optimal solution for realizing one's ambitions. While we have identified digital illustrators as solopreneurs, the following section introduces the environment in which they are creating their businesses.

2.2.2 Digital illustration art marketplace on social media

As digital illustrators can be considered solopreneurs in search of an optimal solution to cater towards personal needs, it is imperative that the environments they choose to build their businesses in do so as well. According to Korpilahti (2010), digital artists are moving art onto a digital sphere. Further emphasizing that the idea behind doing so is dependent on the motivation of the remediation. The researcher explains that remediation is acted for a reason that can only be comprehended by knowing the different presentation forms the artist aims to achieve. In certain cases, the choice to move onto a digitally based platform is the configuration of art pieces being installed within a controlled environment. That being said, the digital artist or illustrator may have the ability to define and choose the output and input devices to accommodate the content of

their primary creations. However, what cannot be controlled are the variations that can be made of that said creation (Korpilahti, 2010).

It is imperative to note that while digital illustrators on social media platforms use the environments to showcase their creations, it is also a way to meet new job opportunities such as making commissioned work or selling uniquely made art. While the large part of art market related operations still take place offline, Sidorova (2019) claims that art market researchers have not paid much attention to the various phenomena of the internet becoming a powerful art market disruptive innovation as the supportive tool to boost art related sales. With a wide variety of platforms and means, the internet has over time turned from an art-marketing tool to an apart-standing art market segment that holds distinct features as well as patterns. (Sidorova, 2019). According to Kang and Chen (2017), because of the major role social media plays in connecting marketers with potential consumers, social media platforms have also become the primary way to discover new art. With the researchers emphasizing on Instagram in particular, the online art market has exploded as a growth of consumers are now not only opting to browse through art. Instead, the popularity has grown to consumers developing a habit to also shop artwork online.

Digital illustrators and other art market players have increasingly referred to new technological means to promote, conserve, and display their creations as a part of cultural branding in the new digital era. The rapid development of communication technology has greatly impacted the globalization of art and introduced the interdependencies between art, technology, and commerce (Hackforth-Jones and Robertson, 2016) as cited in Sidorova (2019). Moreover, Adam (2014) as cited in Decker (2015) explains that with the means to connect a number of different people to art and the artists behind them instantly and worldwide, the art marketplace intertwined with the internet allows artists to reach new consumers, thus ultimately growing the marketplace as a whole. That being said, Fleming (2014) as cited in Neelam (2020), explains that Instagram's platform is an ideal environment for under-represented artists as it allows them to reach a wide range of audiences and enables them to promote their work to their liking. Lastly, Sidorova (2019) concludes by highlighting the much needed anticipation in how increasingly influential social media plays a role in the digital art market. The researcher explains that social media will not only continue to be a tool for artists to build awareness, but social media platforms will also develop to find ways to facilitate sales and convert social media users into potential consumers.

2.3 Trending topics on social media

A significant part of adapting to the environments on social media platforms is to play an active role in either producing or consuming an abundance of content found online. Asur et al., (2011) emphasizes that social media platforms produce and circulate a colossal amount of content in real-time. The researchers explain that such content can range from those created by users originally crafting certain posts, or those that share (and re-share) others. While platforms offer an endless amount of content for users to engage upon, there are only a certain few that ever really manage to gain enough attention to be displayed to users or incorporated into temporal trends (Asur et al., 2011).

According to Romero et al., (2011) as cited in Asur et al., (2011), a common practice users on social media platforms tend to aim for is to create content that successfully resonates strongly with their ideal target audiences, prompting further interaction with them and achieving potentially more visibility. A study by Kairam et al., (2021) suggests that user interest in trending topics diverges during certain periods. However, the overlap between content being searched and content being shared, increases. The researchers emphasize that many search engines on platforms witness a sudden increase of activity around certain topics and in doing so, reflect them back to their many users all in real-time.

2.3.1 Digital illustration and the rise of Non-Fungible Token (NFT) art

Yet, while trends in social media tend to change rapidly over time, the digital artsphere has seen a trend recently continue to grab interests from illustrators, businesses, and the average consumer. Growing public interest towards Non-Fungible Token (NFT) art reached a new zenith on social media platforms when the NFT market witnessed record sales, despite many only knowing little about the overall structure, behavior, and evolution of the market (Nadini et al., 2021). While the interest in NFT art is not only confined within the digital artsphere, the growth of digital illustration circulating social media has caught the attention of digital illustrators. It is important to consider that while more traditional forms of artwork can be valued by the scarcity it possesses, digital art is easily duplicated and may be used in different formats, depending on its type. It is through NFTs and the blockchain technology behind it that digital artwork is "tokenized", the creation of a digital certificate stating the ownership that comes after a purchase

or a selling of a digital art (BBC, 2021). Furthermore, the introduction of blockchain technology as a means to achieve visibility and ownership of digital art has led to a rise of digital illustrators' interests in its use.

The use of blockchain allows the much demanded scarcity in digitally based creations of art and serves a potential solution to plagiarism which can be seen as a significant issue for digital artists as metadata regarding ownership is usually absent in most content (McConaghy., et al. 2017). McConaghy, et al. (2017) makes further reference to the lack of effective laws in place to combat the misuse of original digitally made creative work. Moreover, the researchers emphasize on the fact that the global market for art is increasingly moving online. Buyers, collectors, and those who enjoy digital art are increasingly getting familiar with online shopping as well as enjoying the pieces made digitally available to them through various platforms that they already have grown fond of such as Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter.

2.2 Instagram algorithms and tools

Referring to a statement by Instagram in 2016, Cotter (2018) points out how the platform announced that it would be ordering and showing users posts in a way the platform believes users will care about the most, thus catering audiences with posts that will enhance their experiences further. The engineers behind algorithms put on certain philosophical frames on the world that are then reflected on the codes embedded in the algorithms. (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011 as cited in Cotter, 2018) Thus, Meta's algorithms impose particular evaluations, meanings, reasoning, and a certain outlook on the posts that are put on Instagram.

While Instagram's platform may be an ideal environment to showcase digital illustrations, users have shared concerns on certain features. One of which being the sensitive content filter, where Instagram's algorithms block certain posts that the system finds are against community guidelines. As a result, users have warned their followers that the setting is limiting their reach, urging their followers to take certain actions such as "sharing" or "saving" their posts or to disable the newly introduced feature altogether in hopes to ensure visibility (Carman, 2021). Cotter (2017) points out that such tactics refer to "gaming the system", a phrase the researcher describes as how users not only act on certain knowledge of how the algorithmic system works, but also find a way to use it to their advantage.

Instagram's platform uses intricate algorithms for a number of different content

architecture, organization, and moderation (Middlebrook, 2020). However, because details about how the algorithms function are not made available for the public, users' awareness of the algorithms are then made collectively. One functionality that continues to be of discussion is Instagram's moderation. Middlebrook (2020) gives an example of Instagram's partial censorship concept of "shadowbanning". Often described as the experience of having a drop in visibility, shadowbanning is a form of restriction made on accounts based on moderation. While Instagram acknowledges the existence of "shadowbanning" accounts, no official guidelines are made available for users to understand it (Middlebrook, 2020). Thus, a collective understanding on how to respond to it and how to define it is made. Moreover, while studies have focused on algorithmic biases and patterns in social media moderation, Are (2020) points out that there is a lack of research into how certain phenomena on social media such as that of Instagram's shadowban, works.

2.4 Algorithmic mediation

With only a limited access to the details of how Instagram's algorithms work, it is interesting to discuss the critical role it plays in day to day interactions on the platform. Kitchin (2016) explains that a significantly growing number of our everyday lives are being mediated, augmented, and produced by software dependent technological affordances. While software is highly dependent on the algorithms behind it, there may be a need to further understand the complex ways it plays a role in affecting society. According to Kitchin (2016), algorithms may be conceived in different ways that range from technical, computational, contextual, and cultural. The researcher further explains that because there are certain challenges that hinder algorithmic research, such as gaining access to the algorithm's formulation, there are other methods that can be taken to understand the influence it has on users and how users build an understanding towards it.

Beer (2009) highlights the emergence of user-generated content, and the increasing volume of participatory culture on new media. Beer (2009) cites Lash (2007) term of "new new media ontology", a term that is created to capture the shift towards forms of living in which information turns active in shaping environments. The terminology helps group a number of emerging work highlighting technological challenges or opportunities on human agency offered by the decision-making powers and emerging algorithms that play a role. Bucher (2012) as

quoted in Cotter (2018) explains that algorithms serve as apparatuses that encourage participatory behavior from users on the platform. Through understanding the content and rewarding users with more visibility for example, users associate a certain participatory norm as a means so that the algorithms would "reward" them with stronger visibility.

### 2.4.1 Algorithmic gossip and algorithmic imaginary

Algorithms play a significant role in affecting social realities, often in ways unseen (Cotter, 2018). Dourish (2016) as quoted in Seaver (2017), explains that the very term "algorithm" is determined by social engagements as opposed to the technological constraints it may have. Thus, the understanding of how algorithms work will have different connotations. Both a data scientist working behind Facebook and a mathematician could claim an understanding of the "algorithms" they work with. However, Seaver (2017) concludes that this does not mean that the definition can be generalized.

Bishop (2019) explains that algorithms are used to answer the question of "what should be made visible, and to whom?" That being said, the concept of algorithmic gossip refers to the different set of affordances and discourse used by content creators to negotiate or maintain visibility (Bishop, 2019). Additionally, the researcher clarifies that on one hand, a significant amount of research on algorithmic knowledge and perception tends to investigate "technical" sites such as recommender systems to examine how algorithms are created. On the other hand, an alternative body of studies looks into the everyday interactions with algorithms and highlights how functional theories of algorithmic processes are developed despite users' lack of technical knowledge on the subject matter. Furthermore, Bucher (2017) theorizes that a growing and collective understanding of how algorithms work contributes to what the researcher conceptualizes as "algorithmic imaginary". Moreover, it is a key concept that this study will focus on as it aims to describe the result of how users think, talk, and feel about algorithms on a given platform.

### 2.4.2 Engagement pods

Another aspect of algorithmic gossip is the way in which users on social media platforms create communities that encourage one another to mutually engage with each other's posts in an effort to increase visibility in regards to Instagram's algorithms picking it up. O'Meara (2019)

describes this phenomenon as "engagement pods", where a method of cooperative algorithm hacking takes place and as a possible result, increases the chances of user visibility. Qin, Menezes, and Silaghi (2010) explain that studies on social media platforms tend to overlook the area of recommender systems, the idea that users could provide other users with content recommendations that are relevant to that of which a niche shares. With the help of algorithmic mediation such as the use of hashtags, certain content may be categorized into particular groups. However, such an approach differs across platforms. Thus, this research also touches upon YouTube to further understand how visually based platforms typically incorporate algorithms into the way certain content circulates amongst an audience.

2.4.3 Hashtag descriptives and keywords use for visual context

According to Rathnayake and Ntalla (2020), hashtags can be viewed as more than just technological elements that have been implemented on to the various social platforms on social media. The researchers emphasize that users and the various social contexts surrounding them play a crucial role in both the emergence as well as the performance of certain hashtags. Instagram's hashtag feature is the platform's distinct aspect. The hashtag allows users to not only attach particular meanings to their posts, but it also leads users to other posts that relate to the hashtag (Lim, Sook, and Yazdanifard, 2014 as cited in Neelam, 2020). Rathnayake and Ntalla (2020) explains that hashtags could instead be considered as affordances due to the extent of which platforms depend on the performances of made hashtags. Moreover, the use of hashtags can be seen as a user-generated socially influenced method that indicates certain societal activity rather than a form of categorization (Zappavigna, 2016 as cited in Rathnayake and Ntalla, 2020). Giannoulakis and Tsapatsoulis (2016) explain that visually based platform Instagram can be considered as a rich source for descriptive tags for images and other multimedia in particular.

Research conducted by Giannoulakis and Tsapatsoulis (2016) on image hashtagging by the photo owner/creator and its relation to the processes of Instagram's algorithms suggested that it allowed for more accurate context of the post as opposed to the potentially automatically tagging made by the platform's systems. Thus, it suggests that the use of hashtags are an integral part for users on Instagram to use. Additionally, the use of hashtags grant the images' particular context. Rathnayake and Ntalla (2020) cite Rosenholtz et al., (2007) in pointing out how hashtags may potentially lessen the likelihood of users experiencing "visual clutter". A term that

can be defined as a surplus of objects provided in a display, resulting in a "state in which an excess of items, or their representations, lead towards a degradation of performance at some task" (Rosenholtz et al., 2007 as cited in Rathnayake and Ntalla, 2020). With users only being allowed to post to a limit of 30 hashtags on each individual post (Newberry, 2021), it was evident to see that the illustrators observed in the research had commonly used all possible 30 hashtag characters on their respective posts. While a small number of the illustrators also used their posts' comments sections to make the hashtags.

Furthermore, another method of obtaining descriptive results and providing more context on certain items, are social media platforms' dependency on search query usage. In general use, people's needs to find certain information or content flow through an expression of information retrieval requests towards a search engine. The length of the query or the choice of words play a significant role in the degree of specificity of a search request (Phan et al., 2007). The results of users' search query requests may depend on the creator's use of keywords. Popular visual-sharing platforms such as YouTube allows creators to describe and contextualize their content to accompany the many different videos that are collectively uploaded on the platform. YouTube content creators are given the opportunity to provide such contextual information through the use of a title or the description of tags, a form of metadata that can only be particularly found by the choice of semantics given onto the content (Toderici., et al 2010).

Finally, the key terms chosen for the conceptual concept are listed and further discussed. Firstly, algorithmic gossip is the main central concept particularly analyzed. Bishop (2019) explains how the concept entails how certain beliefs or understandings surrounding how algorithms work may be a result of lack of clarity of a platform's systems. Thus, this study adds to this concept by bringing forward a number of different insights from how digital illustrators perceive Instagram and YouTube's algorithms function without necessarily having the technical awareness to make the assumptions. Lastly, this study touches upon algorithmic mediation where Kitchin (2016) highlights the extent of which algorithms affect the behavior of those engaged with it. By understanding the different tactics or habits digital illustrators take in their efforts of growing visibility on the platform, the algorithmic mediation of Instagram is discussed further.

## 3. Methodology

The majority of studies on algorithms and algorithmic perception have been conducted through a technical scope. Thus, the studies needed a certain level of knowledge about such systems that may be required for an analysis. However, Bishop (2019) explains the significance of other studies that tend to focus on how everyday users view algorithms and the social media platforms they are on. Therefore, this approach does not necessarily require a particular level of knowledge on algorithmic systems to do so. This approach of study however, involves a qualitative meaning-making approach.

It was decided that the study was to be conducted through a digital ethnography with chosen digital illustrators on Instagram. Yet, to further obtain an understanding into how the platforms' algorithms and understanding of the systems may play a role in an illustrator's visibility, in-depth interviews with a selected few were also conducted. Because digital ethnography could also be combined with digital methods to gain a better understanding of contemporary online culture (Born & Haworth 2016; Ritter 2021), two digital methods were also conducted. The digital methods helped examine and discuss the formation of recommender networks on YouTube, and bring forth insights into several main hashtag publics on Instagram. Furthermore, carrying out a digital ethnography strengthens the justification of the study's approach. As the literature mentioned earlier suggests, algorithmic mediation knowledge of social media platforms can be considered lesser known phenomena. Thus, the exploratory nature of ethnographic research was strongly suited for the very nature of the study.

### 3.1 Mixed-method research

Mixed-method research designs offer pragmatic advantages when the study revolves around a complex phenomenon or research question (McCusker and Gunaydin, 2019). While qualitative methods provide further understandings of certain concepts, empirical quantitative data analysis could also provide further clarity. Therefore, it was decided that conducting a qualitative approach as well as a quantitative one in terms of data analysis could bring additional depth in gaining clarifications on certain concepts that arise through the research.

### 3.2 Qualitative data collection

3.2.1 In-depth interviews

Referring to Bucher's (2017) concept of algorithmic imaginary, understanding how digital illustrators on Instagram comprehend the algorithms should be done through a meaning-making exploratory process. Therefore, five different semi-structured interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews offer advantages in prompting elaboration and discussion as each follow-up question would vary from interview to interview (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). At the same time, a semi-structured approach to an interview structure comes from the idea of iteration that can be present throughout the research process where the researcher develops open questions addressing relevant topics, but also holds the freedom to deviate from them asking other questions as the interview process carries on (Dumitrica and Pridmore, 2019). However, due to the substantial number of digital illustrators being on Instagram, the digital illustrators included in the research were those that had met a certain criterion that can be found in Appendix A. This ensures that those included in the research are of relevance and that they could offer in-depth discussions. Digital illustrators included in the research are those that create illustrations with the help of software or technical tools such as the various Adobe Suite programs or other primarily digital art catering applications that provide digital "brushes" or "pens" such as Procreate or Adobe.

It was crucial to note down how the digital illustrators described their experiences being on Instagram or on YouTube. This included knowing what words they used, how much they emphasized on certain concepts or phenomena, and most importantly to know how they had developed such an understanding whether it be word of mouth or through personal experiences they had. Additionally, illustrators involved in the study had a minimum of 2,000 followers and had their Instagram profiles set up as business accounts on Instagram. This suggested that the illustrators had access to different tools and analytics that Instagram offers to their business accounts.

Moreover, it also allows profiles to link external links that one may as opposed to regular Instagram profiles. The digital illustrators involved in the research are commercial digital illustrators, illustrators working for commission-based projects such as contributing visuals to external publications of the likes of the Guardian or the Business Insider. Upon completing the interviews, the recordings were transcribed and then coded for analysis. The analysis was guided through the main research question and the sub-questions that followed. To identify the main themes, a thematic analysis was carried out. A method Braun and Clarke (2006) explain can be

seen as most appropriate to identify, organize, and describe insightful themes that had been found within a data set.

Upon transcribing the interviews, the open coding process was done manually without the use of software. Color-coding the different themes right onto the transcribed document helped have a wide overview onto the different emerging patterns or what additional notes that could be amended. For example, light blue would signal that a certain quote holds a theme that suggests a digital illustrator's personal accounts, whereas highlighting a passage of words in a shade of yellow would signal a quote that holds the digital illustrator's strategic approach when using Instagram.

Firstly, the open codes were made, codes that Dumitrica and Pridmore (2019) describe as codes that are considered descriptive in nature based on what had been observed rather than what had been interpreted. Next, axial codes were produced by reorganizing the open codes based on the themes developed by those that had been created at the start of the research process and the emerging ideas that arose throughout the data collection process. Examples of the coding process can be referred to in Appendix C. Lastly, the data that had been collected from the two qualitative research methods were organized and analyzed through a coding process where codes were contextualized according to the relevant categories that had been inspired through the theoretical framework.

3.2.2 Sampling method

The sampling procedure used for the digital ethnography carried out was purposive. Particularly selected interactions that were observed and analyzed were chosen based on thematic relevance to which was according to the themes discussed in the theoretical framework. Through the digital ethnography, the selection process of potential interviewees was through further understanding the digital illustration artists community on Instagram. Five digital illustrators were then selected through the process of a purposive sampling method. As they are the ideal illustrators with a similarity to that of the community, this allowed making the sample homogenous which would then provide a broad perspective on certain matters (Dumitricia and Pridmore, 2019). The digital illustrators involved in the study had participated in an online interview. The following paragraph offers a brief insight into the different digital illustrators that had been approached in the study.

C.Holme is a commercial digital illustrator in England, the United Kingdom. Finishing art school in 2015, Holme started his illustration practice to which it then transitioned from personal to a formal client-facing business. With illustrations on his Instagram page, C.Holme's illustrations are also used in several different publications, businesses, and other entities on Instagram. M.Kwon is an illustrator based in the US who specializes in animation. However, Kwon's digital illustrations are also used on different publications such as Business Insider or Bloomberg Week on Instagram. I. van Heffen is a digital illustrator in the Netherlands. Having graduated in two different studies, design and animation, van Heffen works on a number of different projects for clients. Such clients range from different creative businesses alike, to Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) both within the country and abroad. T. Froese is a commercial illustrator based in Canada.

Having done illustrations for 12 years, T. Froesse is active on Instagram, YouTube, and SkillShare. Starting illustrations in 2018, he gained a significantly large subscriber base on YouTube. Froesse also expands on his content catering to illustrators through his SkillShare tutorials. Lastly, A.Nanda is also a commercial illustrator based in Spain. Having been an art director and finishing studies in advertising, Nanda is a freelancer and works in making editorials for publications such as the Guardian or other national publications. While the illustrators involved in the study are located in different parts of the world, it was crucial to have illustrators that work in commercial means. Not only does this mean that they are active on Instagram or YouTube, but this also suggests that the illustrators involved have crafted ways in which they adapt to the platform they are on to gain visibility.

3.2.3 Digital ethnography

A digital ethnography aims at creating an understanding of, rather than measuring, development practices (Crowston, 2007 as cited in Nørskov and Rask, 2011). It was also the first method used for this study, due to its inherent quality of allowing observation of real interactions within virtual communities, rather than interpretations of them (Brennan, 2017). Additionally, Nørskov and Morten (2011), explains that the observation method of data gathering and analysis grants the gathering of data across various perspectives of a phenomenon in a natural setting. Thus, conducting a digital ethnography allowed different insights that then provided concepts used in the interviews carried out. It was through the in-depth interviews that certain concepts were then

given the opportunity to be elaborated and added with further context. The digital ethnography involved analyzing the digital illustrator's engagements, behavior, interactions with their followers, habits, and further insights that were then referred to in the theoretical framework.

The ethnography was conducted for a total of ten days, with field notes and screen grabs for additional context into certain phenomena and concepts that have been discussed throughout the results section of the paper. Through establishing context for observation, concepts arising through the observation were then fused with my interpretations which resulted in thick descriptions of digital illustrators on Instagram (Brennan, 2017). Kawulich (2005) explains that taking field notes help in gathering real-time records of what is observed. This includes conversations, interactions, and other activities in a particular setting. Furthermore, fieldnotes allow researchers to clarify certain theoretical stances and elaborate on what has been recorded in detail (Mulhall, 2003). Furthermore, it was imperative to note that the digital ethnography was to be conducted within real-time updates occurring (Kawulich, 2005).

Field notes included illustrator's uploading dates, hashtags used, and additional concepts or behavior such as Instagram Story updates or interaction with followers within a comments section. Being an exploratory purpose, insights obtained from the digital ethnography introduced an understanding into how digital illustrators use the platform's tools and interfaces to grow their visibility, as opposed to why they do so which were then answered in the interview process. Lastly, I took the role of an observer as participant as I had observed while keeping a distance from the observed to not intervene with the activities within the community, despite having the freedom to inquire about those within (Brennen, 2017). It was crucial to consider that after the insights and information gathered throughout the digital ethnography were coded and analyzed, certain aspects that were observed were then added onto the interview guide iteratively.

**3.3 Digital methods**

This research referred to digital methods to compliment the digital ethnography as well as the interview process. Rogers (2009, 2013) as cited in Bonini and Gandini (2020) points out how digital methods offer a strong toolkit for using digital media not only as an object of research, but also a source for methodology. Resorting to digital methods can complement and even empower ethnographic researchers whose aims are to study the different social formations made onto social environments online (Caliandro, 2018, as cited in Bonini and Gandini, 2020).

3.3.1 Data scraping on Instagram

In-depth interviews opened a meaning-making approach of how illustrators are using the platform. The digital ethnography offered discussions and interpretations of what was observed in relation to what has been learned through the literature found. However, data scraping on Instagram provided further evidence into the phenomena. This was carried out with the use of Instamancer, a data scraping tool that supports Instagram research by gathering Instagram posts and related insights as queries used for analysis and discussion (Lewis, 2020).

The research involved analyzing and tracking selected digital illustrators' Instagram profiles for a total of four weeks. Additionally, main hashtags that have been observed throughout the ethnography were also analyzed further. The search queries "#DigitalArt", "#DigitalIllustration", and "#IllustratorsonInstagram" were used to obtain digital sets on Instagram. The chosen hashtags were then analyzed in terms of what posts were associated with them. This included the type of illustrations that used the hashtag, the engagements happening within the comments sections of the posts, and the popularity of the hashtags being used.

Collected data offered insight into the popularity of the hashtags as well as the accounts. Thus, insights complemented the digital ethnography and were then used in discussion of the results. Lastly, it was important to note that insights gathered were information of the digital illustrator's profiles that are publicly published. This includes the number of likes, comments, content posted, and other content that could be found publicly through Instagram itself.

3.3.2 Computational network analysis

Social media environments such as Instagram and YouTube are often visited by a significant amount of users. That being said, it is important to gather insights that are most useful and most relevant to the research purpose. Akhtar (2014) emphasizes that using mining tools that can easily gather insights for such analysis can prove beneficial in terms of time and efficiency. Besides Instamancer, a YouTube research program that supports social network analysis through the means of data gathering (Social Media Research Foundation, 2016) , NodeXL was also used. Data retrieved from the social network analysis were obtained as GEXF and GDF files from the YouTube API.

Prior to running the program, certain search queries needed to be identified. This was

through insights gathered from the interview as well as obtaining main keywords used in the digital illustrator's YouTube videos. To start with, the researcher used an observational approach that consisted of observing the YouTuber's videos while making notes of the potential words used to describe and title the illustrator's videos. This then led to an interview with the illustrator that helped provide additional terms or themes that may have been left out. This approach took on the principle of "the user as a device", as explained by Marres (2012) as cited in Bonini and Gandini (2019) assumes that the user may play a role to a certain extent in collaborating with the ethnographer in their research.

The search query used to assemble the data sets were the following terms: "illustration tutorial", "illustration guide", "commercial illustrator", and "editorial illustration". The following terms had been based off the illustrator's YouTube channel and the keywords the illustrator has said are commonly included onto his YouTube content. Conducting a network analysis with NodeXL offered a visual alternative method of analyzing the data collection process of a significantly complex network of data. The network analysis also offered insights that identify hubs, connected communities, and the potential platform gatekeepers within the networks in the YouTube videos of digital illustrator. Bonini and Gandini (2019) define platform gatekeepers as an "algo-torial power" influenced by the interdependencies of proprietary algorithmic systems and human curators. The researchers explain that platform gatekeepers are both augmented and enhanced by algorithms and the big data behind them. Due to the significant role the algorithms play, this creates new segments of visibility for some users and thus making others as platform gatekeepers (Bonini and Gandini, 2019).

Negara, Andriyani, and Amanda (2021) explain that computational network analysis research results can be visibly presented through graphs that reveal the relationships between individuals. This allows the comprehension of interactions between actors in the system. The researchers explain that such network analysis could help identify the most influential or central of actors. In this study, only betweenness centrality and page rank score are used in the discussions of the results section. Betweenness Centrality can be referred to when a node with the connecting role in the graph is to be measured (Negara, Andriyani, and Amanda, 2021).

Additionally, Grandjean (2015) emphasizes the importance of betweenness centrality as it not only measures all the shortest paths between each pair of nodes within the network, but also takes into account how many times a certain node is on a shortest path between one another.

Thus, pointing out which of the nodes within the network, which in this study refers to YouTuber, have the strongest likelihood for someone to reach their profiles upon searching the key queries stated earlier. Wang et al. (2007) explain that page rank is a widely used concept by engines for ranking certain pages based on the importance and relevance the algorithm determines it to be. This entails that pages ranked with a higher score, are considered most relevant in accordance to the key words.

Having conducted a network analysis, possible risks of gaining limited access to data collected was further avoided. According to Hewson (2017), carrying out a network analysis through certain software or tools allows researchers to gain access to a substantial amount of data about a particular population. Moreover, the researcher points out that network analyses enhance the scope of the research and compliments an unobtrusive observational research such as that of the participant observation also conducted.

3.4 Data Analysis and Research Ethics

Damianakis and Woodford (2012) explain that given the access to a substantial amount of data, ensuring ethical standards are followed may in some instances provide ethical dilemmas for researchers. Wiles (2009) elaborates that the management of consent in which participants should be informed stretches as far as ensuring they know what the data will be used for. Therefore, this study considers the possible implications for digital illustrators and aims to minimize the risks of data mishandling. In order to do so, a detailed informed consent regarding data handling, anonymity, and participant rights will be handed to the interviewees prior recording.

**4. Results**

Being a primarily visually based platform, Instagram continues to be an environment for digital illustrators to seek opportunities and to showcase creations. The following section discusses the different initiatives, habits, and practices digital illustrators have on Instagram in regards to building an online presence. The results section has been subdivided into four subsections, each individually bringing a discussion to answering the research question. The insights collected were based on the selective codes that were found throughout the digital ethnography as well as the interviews conducted.

4.1 In search of the ideal platform

Sidorova (2019) directs attention towards the anticipation of the digital artsphere moving onto social media platforms. The researcher explains that while digital artists are moving onto social media to showcase their creations, social media platforms are also becoming further aware of the digital art market that comes with it. With visuals being the main medium of how creations can be showcased, can Instagram be considered the "ideal" platform for digital illustrators? While the following sections discuss the affordances of Instagram, and how it could cater to the illustrators, we now first discuss the points that suggest why the social media platform is one to be most referred to by most.

Illustrator Froesse (2022) explains that Instagram is really one of the only few platforms for still image sharing that has a following and tools to do so. Elaborating on the fact that illustrators also seek to see results on their creations, Froesse (2022) explains that Instagram's affordances serve as an attractive environment for digital visual art.

"You know, I even like that it's a square format. I think it's just so perfect. It's the most pure form of image sharing that you can have. And there's enough versatility

in that you can even have carousels and it really is a good place to practice. Sharing and getting feedback from an audience? I think that that is actually how we get better as creators." (T.Froese, personal communication, April 26, 2022).

Results from the ethnography also suggested how illustrators were seeking to gain responses from their audiences. Albeit it can be argued that the habit of doing so may be to increase engagement, as Holme (2022) explains is a trend the illustrator notices more and more illustrators on Instagram are doing, it can also be regarded as a way to better understand the audiences. Holme (2022) explains how some digital illustrators within his network link their online web shops with Instagram, a key feature that Instagram for Business offers its users.

4.2 Gaming the algorithm

Bishop (2019) emphasizes on the significant role algorithmic knowledge plays in the social context. It is through the different ideas, beliefs, and knowledge that is shared from one user to another, that a culture is built around algorithms. A crucial concept that has been identified

throughout the ethnography and throughout the interviews with the digital illustrators, is that a certain perspective towards both Instagram and YouTube's algorithms have been set and have influenced the habits of the digital illustrators. Although certain practices remain to be that have yet been confirmed or denied by either YouTube or Instagram themselves, they still play a big role in how digital illustrators have set their profiles up and how they continue to behave.

How does one "game" the social media platform's algorithm, without a confirmation that the habit does play in their favor? Throughout the observation, two out of the ten digital illustrators on Instagram had mentioned the term "shadowban" in their Instagram Story, in an effort to prompt their followers in helping a fellow illustrator's account who has been "shadowbanned". Referring back to Middlebrook (2020), the phenomena is defined as an Instagram account's sudden drop in visibility which is believed to be due to the platform's decision to make it so. Nanda (2022) explains how he thinks it continues to be an obstacle for many within the Instagram community:

> "Instagram is random. The algorithm changes a lot. I don't know, it's really arbitrary. There's a huge problem in the Instagram community with many people, and creators on what they're working on. They are like, kind of a slave of what the platform wants. For example, right now, Instagram is saying you have to load one Reel per week. I don't want to do that. Here's my illustration, that's it."

(A. Nanda, personal communication, March 18, 2022)

In 2020, Instagram announced that it had introduced the feature of Instagram Reels. This allowed users to record, edit, and publish 15-second multi-clip videos with various audios and effects. Upon publishing an Instagram Reel, one can be shared through the user's Instagram profile and on the new segment within the platform's Explore page (Introducing Instagram Reels, 2020). It became apparent that many of the digital illustrators observed in the study, had also created content through Instagram Reels. User zatransis (2022) for example, has six different Instagram Reels of his digital illustration progresses on their profile, with one having more than 60,000 views. Although, upon data scraping the key hashtags (#DigitalArt", "#DigitalIllustration", and "#IllustratorsonInstagram) a significant number of posts were mainly single posts and videos, different to that of an Instagram Reel.

Another way the posts may have received a significantly large number of views, is

through the extent of which digital illustrators may re-share their fellow illustrator's content. O'Meara (2019) concept of engagement pods explain how certain communities online tend to encourage and help boost their fellow peers' performances. Although O'Meara's examples surround the act of certain content creators "commenting" on one another's posts, this can be considered an example on Instagram. The ethnography revealed how some digital illustrators would use the share feature on other illustrators' posts and have it on their Instagram stories. Instagram Reels can be considered to be one of the ways users on the platform are creating content in hopes of adhering to what the platform is pushing towards its many users. Additionally, the act of resharing content may also increase chances of visibility from one illustrator to another. However, what were some of the trends that users were picking up on on YouTube? Froese (2022) explains that while he posts shorter videos of his YouTube videos on Instagram, he thinks "the trend on YouTube is definitely around tutorials and demos and how to do things. People who are doing illustration and are making demos on Procreate right now in particular, are going to garner more views." (T.Froese, personal communication, April 26, 2022).

4.3 Making Instagram as the "ongoing portfolio"

When asked about the habits digital illustrators have on Instagram, the majority of the respondents in the interviews conducted emphasized how their Instagram pages were used as a reference for potential clients to look at and as a channel to get in contact with the illustrator. Freelance commercial digital illustrator C.Holme described his Instagram page as "an ongoing live portfolio", one where the illustrator noticed his page transitioning "from something more personal, to something more client facing." (C. Holme, personal communication, March 17, 2022). Touching upon the concept of a client facing portfolio on Instagram, similarly, commercial digital illustrator A.Nanda, pointed out on how his art was used for several editorial clients and publishers such as the Economist or The Guardian. According to A.Nanda, representatives from such publishers had followed his page for some time, and in doing so had gotten in contact with the illustrator through Instagram.

While A.Nanda explained how he tends to cater to his follower base, he described that upon noticing substantial audience growth, his Instagram art page was more of a "tool or channel to attract potential clients." (A. Nanda, personal communication, March 18, 2022). All the while emphasizing the importance of taking the time to curate, build, and establish connections through

his page. Moreover, when elaborating on the importance of A. Nanda's Instagram profile being attractive for work opportunities, the illustrator made a rough estimate that "about 95% of work comes from Instagram. It is through accounts that reach out to me, or those that already followed me for some time" (A.Nanda, personal communication, March 18, 2022). Additionally, Nanda (2022) believes that people in high positions within certain organizations such as those of publications, use Instagram as a means to connect with potential new artists:

> "I realized this from the beginning. Art directors or whoever, you know, whoever is in charge of finding new illustrators, graphic designers, whatever. They start using Instagram as a tool. Also, because they're looking for fresh things, new things." (A.Nanda, personal communication, March 18, 2022)

However, what were some of the key aspects that could distinguish between regular Instagram pages to that of portfolios? Illustrator I. van Heffen explained that upon getting in contact with clients through Instagram in the early days of setting his Instagram page up, he recalled that "posting personal posts was just not aligned with whatever was going on professionally" (I. van Heffen, personal communication, March 23, 2022). It was further revealed through the following interviews as well as the digital ethnography, that a significant number of digital illustrators distinguished posts dedicated to personal life on their personal accounts. Whereas their digital art accounts, solely focused on their creations and only a small number of illustrators had incorporated a more personal touch by posting images that are not necessarily related to their artwork. This includes selfies, holiday pictures, and other day to day images.

To further understand how digital illustrators may potentially be making their Instagram pages to be more of a portfolio, rather than regular Instagram profiles, insights gathered through the digital ethnography suggested other aspects that could help make more of a distinction. One main aspect that was noticed through the ethnography was the consistency in posting. It was found that consistently posting was a common practice the illustrators aimed to achieve. Having an average of two to three posts per week was found to be commonly done amongst the illustrators observed. Digital illustrator and Instagram user shercle (2022) for example, would regularly share new illustrations made, but also share older ones that have been made in the past, on their Instagram story update of the day.

Whereas digital illustrator zatranasis (2022) had posted snippets and made part-series

posts that show updates on ongoing illustration projects. Consistency in posting is a practice that C.Holme explained was one that he has also been "encouraged" to do by some of those in his network. When asked if he could elaborate further, he explained that he understood the habit of consistent posting was a way for Instagram's algorithms to "pick up" user profiles. The more a profile was posting, the more the platform would understand that it was active. Thus, Instagram's algorithms may well promote certain content on to the platform's Explore feed or make particular posts more accessible to the public audience. However, this was something not evidently stated by Instagram, or Meta. Despite the lack of evidence over the concept, Holme (2022) stated that clients finding his profile has been one of the main ways of finding and starting projects. Making reference to a post that he had re-shared of an illustration he had commissioned for German magazine, Spiegel Magazin's social design awards in 2021.

Van Heffen emphasizes how before being on Instagram, client based projects or assignments were briefs that happened through different channels such as emails or face-to-face interactions. However, the illustrator explained how Instagram became the way he receives client assignments as a norm, especially during the pandemic when interaction was its most limited:

> "Most of the time they just see you somewhere because of course, you also get mentioned sometimes. They see you there most of the time on their feed. And I can get at least four replies here and there. I basically use my work as a portfolio so they just check out and they can be like this is that or this is this and I can do something with it. Client assignments I get from the clients who check me out once and they see and know your work. I think it's a different kind of approach that I would usually have per say. Instagram is made for in the sense that you can just go to the platform and have your say there. Make a statement to all the parties
>
> that you interact with and just treat it basically as a sort of up to date portfolio." (I.
>
> van Heffen, personal communication, March 23, 2022)

Interestingly, despite going through a similar transition of having a personal page turn into a client-facing page, illustrator Kwon pointed out how she sees her personal website as more of the portfolio, and her Instagram page as a place to showcase her creations. To make more of

the distinction, Kwon (2022) explains that "Instagram is the place I put my art for more exposure. Everyone goes on Instagram almost everyday, right?"

4.3.1 "Link in bio"

Another common practice that had been noticed throughout the observation was the way digital illustrators referred to their external projects such as webshops, websites, or other portfolios onto their respective Instagram pages. Throughout the observation, almost all digital illustrators observed in the research had made their art page one that showcases their work. Moreover, it was also important that the illustrators were reachable, may it be through Instagram or other means of contact. Many of which made references to their respective "bios" which referred to the 150 character summary located underneath a user's profile picture. This includes information about the user or their business, short descriptions, contact information, and the ability to include one external link to particular resources found outside of the social media platform (Gotter, 2020). It was found that the majority of the illustrators in the study referred to external links that would lead their followers to further contact details, upcoming projects, and to the illustrator's personal webshop. Many of whom emphasized their respective external links on individual posts with a similar call to action, "link in bio". This included it being referred to on their Instagram story updates, post captions, and within the comments sections of their posts.
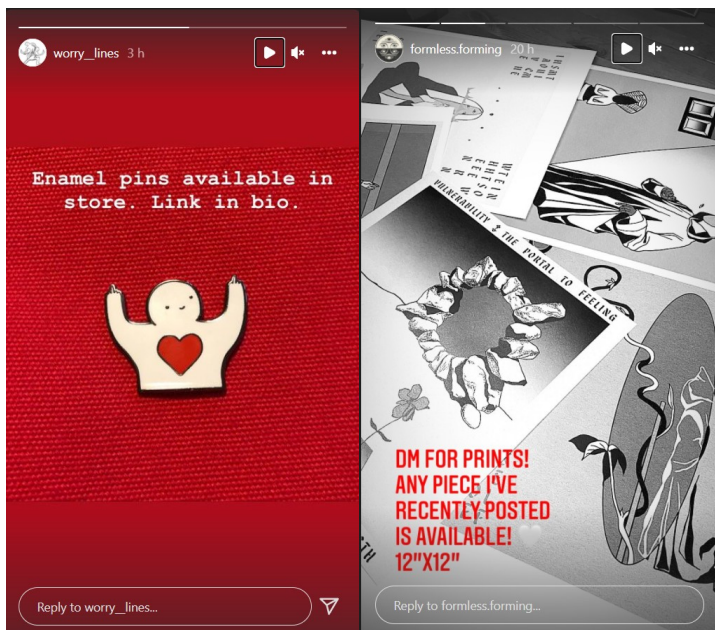


Figure 1. Instagram story promotions

User worry_lines (2022) captioned an illustration post with "please support me on Patreon! Link in bio! My book is in stores now, link also in bio. Visit my store (link also in bio) to order mugs, pins, tea towels, stickers, tote bags, tattoo tickets, or a print of this or any other drawing from this page". Posting the same post on their story update, worry_lines (2022) also hinted on special offers and limited edition items that followers can find on their webstore. Whereas digital and ink illustrator formless.forming (2022) regularly promotes printed copies of their artwork on their Instagram stories. Incorporating a call to action for their followers to send an enquiry for the possibility to purchase. van Heffen (2022) suggests that building a portfolio-styled Instagram page is about "connecting people and making sure that you are really showing the work you make. The more people that are there to see it, the better it is." As van Heffen, along with illustrators C.Holme (2022) and A.Nanda (2022) point out, receives projects from businesses or individuals representing a certain entity that find them through Instagram. When asked about the interactions one of the illustrators have in terms of working for new clients, Nanda (2022) stated the following:

> "I have a lot of followers on Instagram. In the followers are art directors, curators,
>
> and everything. I know that every time I get a new client willing to work for me again. Why? Because I'm fast, I will find the time and I also have the quality. Reaching out on Instagram is perfect for them because they don't have much time
>
> to be finding illustrators. But once they have the time, they're going to reach me."
> (A. Nanda, personal communication, March 18, 2022)

Making references to online shops, projects, sales, contact details, and in some illustrator profiles, their specialties (eg. graphic design, branding, logo creation, etc.), most of the digital illustrators observed in the study had made links in customized personal landing pages that lists down the aforementioned topics which allow users to go through the pages easily. Figure 2 below provides examples of the links found on certain digital illustrators' profiles and what it would look like if one were to tap on the link. The links were established through shortcuts that would lead other users on the profile to easily maneuver through what was offered by the digital illustrator and although most are designed to cater to users scrolling on mobile devices, they are

also made accessible to those on desktops.
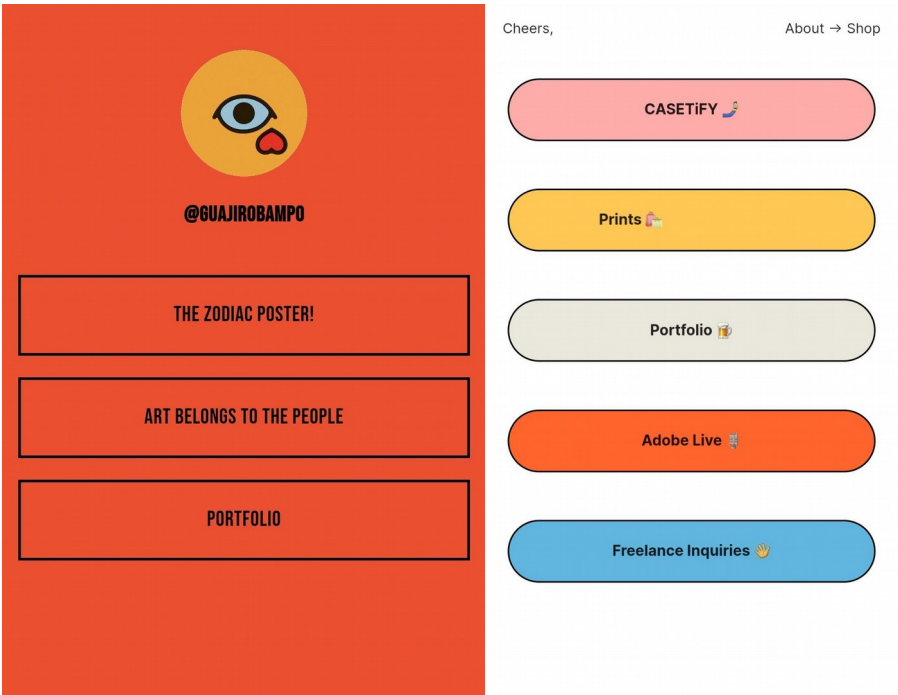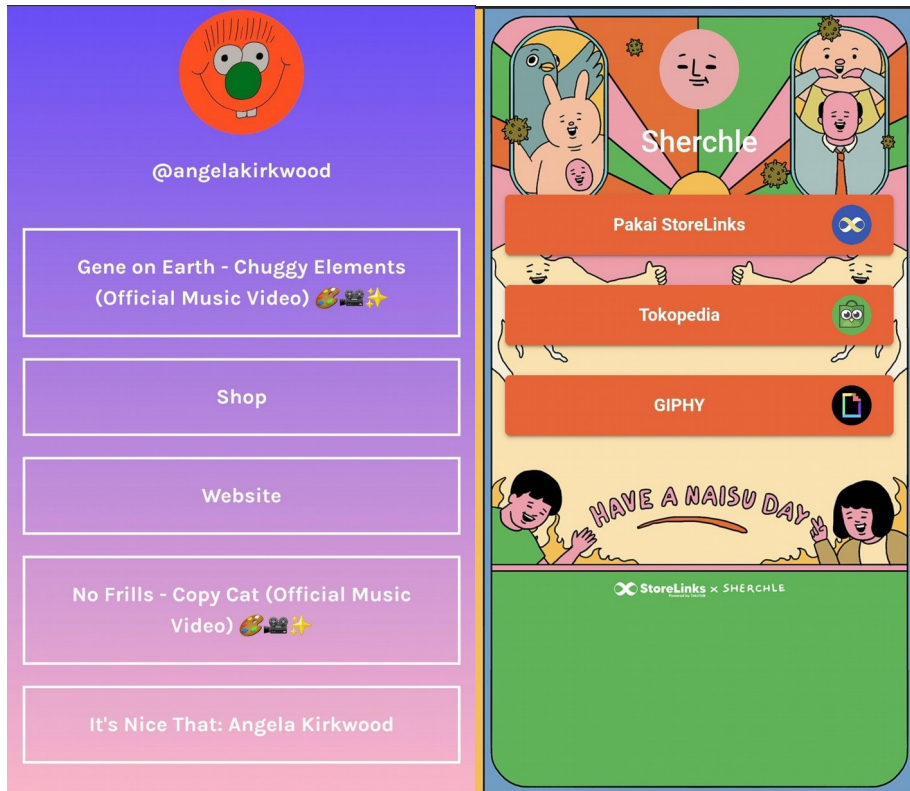
Figure 2. External links found on digital illustrator bio

4.4 Keeping up with the trends of the platform

According to Bucher (2012) as cited in Cotter (2018), the way in which algorithms of platforms serve its users as apparatuses, is to encourage further participatory behavior from those most active on it. The researcher further points out that users may be "rewarded" with more visibility in the event of those adhering to what the platform aims to achieve, thus sending out a cycle of incentive and habit creation on the platform. In certain cases, algorithms on social platforms pick up collective habits and trends that users make. Not only does this offer an incentive for users to participate in the trends that have been socially constructed by the many users participating on that social media platform, but this also encourages users to keep up with the trends in different ways. In late May of 2021, Instagram announced that it would be opting to give even further control to its many users. What this meant was that Meta was preparing to offer different settings for users on the platform, and to further customize their experiences on Instagram. One setting the social media giants introduced was the ability to hide "like" counts on posts. The effort started as Instagram received feedback from users on how hiding like counts may depressurize

people's experiences on Instagram and play a role in getting a sense for what is trending on the platform (Instagram, 2021). Through the observation, it was seen that many digital illustrators applied the mentioned setting in their posts. Rather than having a total number of likes being visible, the posts would instead mention another user who had "liked" the post and summarize the total with the word "and others". When asked about the "hide like count" setting and whether Instagram's idea was applicable, Holmes (2022) explained his decision in doing so, upon Instagram's announcement:

> "About a year ago I found out where you can turn off the like counts. For some reason, just doing that removed any stress from it. I guess it sort of took the pressure off a bit like maybe there was sort of a something in my mind about like, what if I haven't got over this number of likes, it's a bit embarrassing, or I don't know, whatever. Kind of self-justification? And then just before Christmas, in one
>
> of my posts, I think that the algorithm just grabbed it and boosted it. And I basically doubled my like counts." (C. Holme, personal communication, March 17, 2022).

Yet, while like counts play a crucial role in helping users identify the performances of their posts, it can be suggested that it also played a role in demoralizing the digital illustrators. What was further evident throughout the observations was that a significantly large number of digital illustrators who had used the hide-like-count setting, tend to have their posts on the Explore page of Instagram. Nanda (2022) recalled having his post up on the Explore page for the first time, all the while emphasizing how important it was as opposed to just having his own page referred to on his client's Instagram pages:

> "There were many posts I was tagged in. There's the Washington Post and some of the Guardian. They do that when they work with me or with other artists. Of course, they put their own work there and they just serve this how it is and tell who did that. But I don't get much exposure from this kind of thing. The big change here has been, as I told you, when three months ago when Instagram started to put my illustrations in the Explore section. That was my huge exposure." (A. Nanda, personal communication, March 18, 2022).

4.4.1 Emphasizing on self-branding

Sidorova (2019) explains how digital artists tend to engage with innovative media to further intensify their personal branding in the digital age. Additionally, in an ever increasingly competitive market, it is crucial for entrepreneurs in their fields to put out certain aspects that differentiate them from their competitors. One of the interviewees in the research explained how he noticed the growing trend of digital illustrators that are picking up on the habit of incorporating more of a "personal element" into their online profiles both on Instagram and on YouTube. While all the digital illustrators involved in the interview process explained the importance of keeping a "client-facing" profile as opposed to that of one that is more personal, two of the five illustrators did point out how it has also been a trend observed by more digital illustrators who aim to grow their visibility online.

Illustrator M. Kwon (2022) explained how she noticed a loss of followers upon posting images of herself on her art account by saying that she "would post a selfie or something. Or just something that I'm doing on that day or week - not illustration connected per say. Then I would suddenly lose followers, because I feel people ask themselves "who is this random account?" Yet, at the same time, she pointed out how it could be a stand-out trend to "infuse personal identity into art". She adds that although she noticed a decline in followers, she did see "a rise in engagement".

When asked if the illustrator could explain why, she elaborated that it may well be because her followers were gradually "more curious to see what this person who makes the art they like, is really like." (M.Kwon, personal communication, April 15, 2022). Furthermore, results from the digital ethnography did reveal a small number of digital illustrators observed incorporating a certain type of personality or voice upon their profiles. This was not only done through building on unique individual artistic styles such as particular brush stroke patterns or color choices, but it was also evident through the ways in which the illustrators touch upon trending topics happening in and around their respective environments. Yet, while incorporating a voice and a "human element" seemed to be a trend that only some digital illustrators try to adopt, Froese (2022) explains that having personal perspectives and voicing them on his digital illustration YouTube channel was an important aspect of engaging as well as growing his follower base:

> "I might share something from a very personal perspective and that people would

kind of speak about that. It's not really a separation where I have content ideas. And so people engage more with that. And there's a lot more strangers that find me on the algorithm and stuff. And the way I keep in touch with people is definitely I try to talk with them. I try to reply to every question, every comment that people leave. Oftentimes people ask a question in response to a video and that

will become a topic for another video. The idea is that I have a more direct connection with people if we're a part of a community where people are a little bit

invested. And so through that, I've gotten to know my core audience a lot more." (T.Froese, personal communication, April 26, 2022)

4.4.2 Incorporating trends

One of the other main insights that had been found was the way a number of digital illustrators infused their art with both what is trending on Instagram and to what is trending in the world at the time. At the time of observation for example, certain illustrations that had been uploaded on to the digital illustrator's Instagram profiles made references to the situation in Ukraine. A number of illustrations incorporated color schemes that made a visible representation of the Ukrainian' flag by using the country's iconic blue and yellow. Other illustrations also made representation of certain trending topics affecting the community around the illustrator, such as the ongoing climate change discourse or other particular political events happening in the illustrator's environment.

It was important to understand how a distinction could be made between a more personal art portfolio and that of a client-facing one. While for example, four out of the ten digital illustrators observed in the ethnography were actively making commission based projects. May it be through the artwork created, the external posts that the other digital illustrators share on their stories (eg. petitions or news), or through the ways in which the illustrators engage with their followers in conversing in the comments sections of their posts, and emphasize a more "human" element onto their profiles. When asked about the main trends Froese (2022) sees happening for other illustrators with a following on social media, the digital illustrator noticed that:

"There is a trend of having more of a personality element. So, a lot more like

illustrators like Jazza. He's like one of the top ones in digital illustration. He's well known amongst YouTube channels and YouTube creators. Probably on animation. He's very charismatic." (T.Froese, personal communication, April 26, 2022).

On one hand, insights have pointed out the importance of maintaining a more professional and a mainly work oriented portfolio. On the other hand, catering their arts to trending topics, and having a more "personality element" could potentially lead to having more engagement and thus more visibility. In one of the illustrations a digital illustrator had posted in relation to the situation in Ukraine, comments such as "thank you for making this" or "beautiful dedication" were made by their respective followers. This suggests a feeling of gratitude that followers may have in seeing their favorite illustrators using their platform to voice certain stances. However, another digital illustrator that had made a similar piece referring to the situation had received conflicting responses. Negative comments such as "leave politics out of your art, please" or simply, "unfollowed" can be seen as disapproval from their follower base. Discussing the times illustrator Kwon (2022) used their profile to voice certain opinions, they described having a "love hate relationship with Instagram". They further elaborated that "without Instagram, I probably wouldn't see what those in my illustration community are making. It's nice to see what they're up to and be inspired by their art." Yet at the same time, they point out how there can be "too much information" coming from the platform and that certain conflicting opinions are easily made visible (M.Kwon, personal communication, April 15, 2022).

### 4.4.3 Jumping onto the Non-Fungible Token (NFT) trend

One of the significant findings throughout the digital ethnography, as well as the interview process, was the popularity of digital illustrators creating and showcasing their work as non-fungible tokens (NFTs) illustration. Described as both a trend setter in the digital artsphere and the potential solution to combating the risks of art plagiarism (McConaghy, 2017), a significant number of illustrators observed throughout the digital ethnography had created NFT art content. All the while using their Instagram profiles to promote their NFT related artwork. While it would be suggested that NFT art was popular amongst the illustrators observed throughout the digital ethnography, the digital illustrators involved in the interviews had different opinions in regards to the trend. On one hand, all five illustrators had acknowledged the fact that NFT art is an up

and coming trend. Moreover, the illustrators also explained how the trend will only continue to be one that develops over time. On the other hand, the illustrators have also considered it to be a controversial method of creating digital illustration art, and one that may have yet been seen as another form of avant-garde art.

Referencing the lack of quality the digital illustrators involved in the interviews tend to observe in most NFT made art, Nanda (2022) suggests that despite a number of requests being made from connections within his network for the illustrator to contribute in joining the trend, there is an understanding that for a large part, the illustrator community has a certain stigma against the trend. Nanda (2022) believes that most illustrators choose to not be participating in it. "When people ask for collaborations with illustrators like us, we say no, and that is why there is a lack of quality" (A.Nanda, personal communication, March 18, 2022). However, the observation process of the research did point out how it continues to be a growing trend amongst digital illustrators both upcoming and established. One interviewee described his experience and frustrations of noticing fellow digital illustrators in his network moving onto creating NFT digital illustration:

>"There's even a whole language about it. Some people get evangelical about it, they get defensive. The NFT people, if they heard me say things they don't agree with, then I could have made enemies. There is a bit of a culty feel around it and people I see making NFT art have sold themselves to the concept. It's all they're doing. It's now their focus. And, I'm looking at people who were previously making great art that I was always impressed by, but now I'm seeing anymore." (T.Froese, personal communication, April 26, 2022).

User and digital illustrator debbietea (2022) posted an announcement that explained how the illustrator's art would be up on display in a virtual art exhibition. Making references by how the pandemic interfered with several art exhibitions that had been planned out earlier in the previous year, the illustrator explained that their art had recently been chosen amongst a number of other digital artists to be on display at the New Float exhibition that exists in a metaverse of geo-located art experiences belonging to digital art curator, REALWORLD. Furthermore, the digital illustrator replied to comments asking how the followers could access the exhibition to view their art by redirecting them to "the app REALWORLD ART which will allow you to visit New Float and the Realworld Collection." (debbietea, 2022). A digital art experience working

with site-specific virtual and augmented reality art pieces, REALWORLD collects and showcases work done by upcoming or established digital artists working in the field (REALWORLD, 2022).

The concept of NFTs continues to grab the attention of both digital illustrators and those who grow fond of particular digital artists as well. With the pandemic playing an overarching role in impeding the possibility of having physical exhibitions where illustrators and artists alike can showcase their creations, virtual exhibitions such as REALWORLD help digital artists find visibility amongst those who form a liking towards the new trend of digital art. Comments by digital illustrator debbietea's followers on the mentioned post, provided positive reactions.

## 4.5 Using keyword search queries and hashtag descriptives

Giannoulakis and Tsapatsoulis (2016) suggests that it is due to the substantial amount of visual aspects Instagram offers to its users that the use of hashtags has become a key part of how the platform works. Additionally, Baeza-Yates, Hurtado, and Mendoza (2004) explains that keyword queries submitted to a search engine suggest a number of different related queries. Through the clustering process of obtaining historical searches and preferences of users whose searches have been identified by the engine, the platform can then offer results to users according to a relevance criterion. It was important to note the two suggestions by the respective researchers as the digital ethnography offered insight into how digital illustrators were using both hashtags and keyword descriptives to gain visibility.

## 4.5.1 Hashtag descriptives on Instagram

Mathes (2004) as cited in Highfield and Leaver (2015) explains that the concept of social tagging on photo-sharing platform Flickr led to the phenomenon of "folksonomy". Referring to the combination of words "folk" and "taxonomy", Mathes (2004) points out that there is a collective social organization and information processing at a metadata level that occurs by users who continuously adapt to it, or use it in their own ways. It was evident that the use of hashtags on the digital illustrators' posts on Instagram were frequently seen. The observation revealed that a small number of illustrators used more descriptive and focused specific long-tail hashtags such as "#AdobeCS5", "#PosterDesignInspiration", or hashtags that mentioned a specific city or country the illustrator was in.

For example, user cheersjack (2022) would often put "#PosterDesignSydney" at the end of the user's posts. Whereas general hashtags such as "#DigitalArt", "#DigitalIllustration", "#Animation", and "#IllustratorsOfInstagram" were more frequently used amongst digital illustrators. Moving towards digital methods to analyze the hashtags further, it was revealed that it was relatively uncommon for users to use long-tail hashtags, and that a majority of the descriptive hashtags had less than 500 accounts using them. Upon data pulling, general hashtags such as the three latter mentioned, revealed that they had individually more than 15,000 accounts using them.

Not only are hashtag use helpful for digital illustrators to adhere to Instagram's system habit of showcasing certain posts on to the Explore page, but it also increases the probability of other users to find the illustrator's artwork upon searching. However, it was also apparent that digital illustrators who already gained a significantly large follower base of 3,000 or more followers, did not necessarily use hashtags on their posts. Incorporating other platform affordances such as Instagram Reels or Instagram Stories, other illustrators observed tend to not use hashtags when making captions for their creations. Illustrator Nanda (2022) offered his opinion on why he tends to avoid the use of hashtags onto his digital illustrations that are published on to Instagram:

> "I had to put hashtags in the beginning. But after a while, you have to know when to put short hashtags or long hashtags. And I was like, man, you really have to know all these labels or whatever? These were new things for me and one of the things I wanted to do was to position myself in other people's minds. Maybe I could have a typical Instagram profile where I don't bother you so much with content, post twice per week and with the generic type of hashtags. Maybe it might get attention from a huge market or whatever, but people that post everything and use the common hashtags may just get the attention but not the right people that stay on their profile." (A.Nanda, personal communication, March
>
> 18, 2022)

With over five million counts on the number of accounts using the hashtag #IllustratorsOnInstagram, this was seen as the most commonly used hashtag that the digital illustrators observed in the study used. What differentiated the hashtag in particular from the

other hashtags used, was the relevancy and consistency of most posts that had used the hashtag. A substantially large amount of posts that used the #IllustratorsOnInstagram hashtag were digitally created pieces, despite not clearly stating the word "digital". Whereas other notable and commonly used hashtags such as #Illustration or #DigitalArt, did not have the same consistency and relevancy as it had different types of illustrations with a mixture of digital and printed.

Referring back to the importance of staying on what is trending on Instagram, illustrations that addressed certain popular topics would incorporate the hashtags associated with the topic. The hashtag #Ukraine for example, had over 30 million posts using it at the time. While the idea of incorporating trending hashtags leads to use of a trending topic that other users may be looking to participate further in, it did not necessarily guarantee the right exposure for digital illustrators as the posts that had used the hashtag were a mix of different pictures that ranged from real-time photography, news headlines, and illustrations.

In conclusion of the mentioned subsections of the study, it can be suggested that digital illustrators are adapting to Instagram's features to increase their presence on the platform through a number of ways. Firstly, while it is important to develop their Instagram profiles into a portfolio in a way that clearly showcases their work, it is also crucial for illustrators to stand out. One way of doing so, is to incorporate a sense of self-branding through adopting a voice or personality into their profiles. This is achieved by interactions with their audiences, staying active on the platform by consistently posting, and incorporating trending topics onto their profiles either through the artwork they create or the discourse they are involved in.

### 4.5.2 Hashtag descriptives on YouTube

On YouTube, hashtags function in a similar fashion. The hashtags act as metadata to help add additional context to already made content. On the content creator's side, YouTube's hashtags let creators connect their content with similar videos by other creators that share the same hashtag on the platform. This then allows viewers to find content about a similar topic if they were to search or click on a particular hashtag. Despite letting content creators have the freedom to customize and create different hashtags, the platform limits it to having 60 hashtags per video in total. Those with more, or those who make hashtags that are deemed not abiding the terms and conditions risk having their videos taken down. (Google, 2022). While hashtags on Instagram remain to be the core of how other users can potentially discover other users' content, YouTube

hashtags help creators find commonly used topics that upon search request may lead to further visibility. Although YouTube's introduction of hashtag use has been widely popular amongst content creators on the platform, Froese (2022) explained why he chose to not use them when creating his YouTube videos. Instead, the digital illustrator creates and publishes his videos by incorporating keywords that are based upon the main topics that he feels his ideal audience would tend to look for:

"I'm sparing with them because I feel like it's possible to misuse them. I'm afraid that YouTube will penalize me if I abuse them. I'm also afraid that it'll make it too

specific. I have friends that use hashtags. Or in addition to tag locations. You can tag yourself by location and let's say I tag this as Vancouver, does that mean it favors Vancouver and not show itself to people in Copenhagen or Beijing? So I don't. I'm afraid of limiting my content if these things work. I think when there seems to be a really good reason to tag something that's tied up with maybe a cultural movement or a question people have then maybe. Like a video about how to illustrate in Procreate. I think it's completely logical that I would tag

Procreate." (T.Froese, personal communication, April 26, 2022)

Instead of hashtag use, Froese (2022) explains how he instead focuses on ensuring the right word choice centraling toward the digital illustrator's main channel's themes and topics. Video titles that propose questions such as "are you an illustrator or designer? Or top questions illustrators ask. Occasionally, I'll just be more broad about the word "art" so I'll have the intention of the words in my titles and on my thumbnails too. I'm being deliberate about my focus on the channel, which is about commercial illustration" (T.Froese, personal communication, April 26, 2022). However, just how far could the right keyword choice pan out to the digital illustrator's YouTube channel? To further look into the inquiry, we now turn to the digital method in analyzing YouTube. Upon obtaining several keywords and themes, we turned to NodeXL and Gephi to map out and analyze the network of users or creators on YouTube based on their respective connections and keyword usage.

*Table 1. Betweenness centrality score and page rank based on keyword search*

| YouTube ID | Betweenness centrality score | Page rank |
|---|---|---|
| Mr. Tom Froese | 244214.0 | 0.290 |
| JohBreuch | 1365.0 | 0.004 |
| ChrisMechery | 1362.0 | 0.003 |
| Hella Green | 1362.0 | 0.003 |
| Daniel Rowell | 1362.0 | 0.002 |
| E R | 910.0 | 0.002 |
| Tessiejoel | 908.0 | 0.002 |
| Sayan Biswas | 908.0 | 0.001 |
| Van Huynh | 538.0 | 0.00 |
| Relax In Nature | 455.0 | 0.00 |

*Betweenness centrality and page rank score test*

The network is made of a total of 540 users. Gephi then visualized and rendered the network of connections on the basis of in-degree centrality according to the incoming nodes identified. Touching upon the measure of betweenness centrality, the scores show the extent of a particular node that appears on the shortest paths between one another. This indicates how likely a keyword relates to a node. The table suggests that while T.Froese's YouTube channel holds strongest connections to the keywords analyzed, several other YouTubers also have similar keywords and hold a probable link as well. Moreover, page rank score also helps indicate how strong the pages which in this case are YouTube channels, relate to the keywords analyzed, giving T.Froese's YouTube channel the strongest score. This suggests that the mentioned YouTubers have predominant visibility and that if a user were to look up the mentioned keywords such as "commercial illustration", there is a significant chance users will then find the mentioned channels. Thus, it can be concluded that while hashtags play an important role in terms of findability, it may differ to that on YouTube in the case of consistently using the right keywords that identifies the niche the content maker aims to showcase.

## 5. Discussions

Kitchin (2016) mentions how algorithmic mediation plays a substantial role in human behavior in various contexts. Interactions online are continuously being mediated by the software dependent technological affordances. All the while, however, pointing out how there is yet a significant amount of knowledge or research to comprehend the severity of the role. This research into algorithmic mediation on digital illustrators brings in new insight into the potential way algorithmic mediation plays on a particular type of user. Not only does this research lay out new perceptions digital illustrators and solopreneurs tend to have on the algorithms role, but it also suggests new trends that are created as a result. Additionally, this also touches upon the theory of Beer (2000) of how there is an increasing shift of how users are actively shaping the environments they participate in online. Although the research provides a base for understanding how people view the algorithms of affordances they so often interact with, there is a lack of technical clarity. Furthermore, McConaghy et al. (2017) explains about how the global art market is increasingly moving to the digital sphere, and in doing so it is continuously intertwining with social media platforms that cater to the user experience for both the audience and the digital artists themselves.

Lastly, the research into digital illustration is a study into a fairly new and unexplored phenomena. As Sidorova (2019) hints, the digital artsphere and its relationship with social media platforms is one that is yet to be explored closely by academia. With emerging trends such as NFTs and updates being made for social media platform's affordances, future research into the phenomena may result in identifying emerging concepts that have yet to be discussed further in this study.

## 6. Conclusions

The aim of this research was to explore and build an understanding into the ways digital illustrators are using Instagram to grow their visibility. This includes gaining an understanding into the algorithmic mediation of digital illustration. To answer the research question of how digital illustrators are using Instagram to gain visibility, we first discuss and consider the different habits the digital illustrators tend to have on the platform. This study obtained the different strategies used by digital illustrators on Instagram, the various perceptions they have about the platform, and new discoveries of habits or practices arising on the platform. It is

important to note that while certain habits such as having a consistency of posting or developing a more client-facing portfolio of a profile can be considered as practices where illustrators as a collective tend to pick up on, they are examples of decisions that have been influenced by a pre-existing belief that had been culturally made by those within their networks. However, it is the way the illustrators do so, and the way they have built that said understanding that distinguishes one illustrator from another. This understanding of the role particular algorithms play revolves around the concept of algorithmic mediation, which Kitchin (2016) explains as the understanding of how algorithms can be considered as a new overarching facet to society and societal norms.

Throughout the research, an emphasis on creating the "ideal client-facing profile" was not only made within the interviews, but also observed during the ethnographic process as well. The common perception that the insights gathered from the interviews was that there is a collective agreement on the need to distinguish a personal approach of being on Instagram, and one that remains professional. Gratton (2011) as cited in Belt et al. (2015) emphasizes that a striking feature of solopreneurship is when individuals take self-drive and the ability to use it within fast-paced or fast-evolving environments. With a substantial amount of digital illustrators on social media, let alone Instagram, it continues to be crucial for one to stand out. Reaching the right audiences, gaining follows, and reaching monetary goals remains to be important targets for digital illustrators on Instagram.

That being said, the results show that digital illustrators have the means to distinguish a personal and client-facing profile. This decision making process can be suggested as one that falls within the merits of the aforementioned solopreneur concept of self-adapting within a fast-paced environment. The results suggest that digital illustrators on Instagram typically set their Instagram profiles up as one that is client-facing, leaving little to some space for personal content. This process is acted upon within their own jurisdiction, all the while keeping in mind the prospect of reaching monetary goals. Furthermore, insights reveal that the digital illustrators have identified who potential clients are, making a distinction between those who can be considered as regular enjoyers and those that have the means to open opportunities.

By getting in contact with potential parties such as art directors, news editorials, or other businesses, digital illustrators act as solopreneurs on Instagram. However, the need to incorporate the "human-element" within the digital illustrator's profiles can also be considered an important aspect of building a standout Instagram portfolio. It is how digital illustrators can

engage with their followers and still maintain the professional outlook on their Instagram profiles that stands out as a strategy to help gain visibility. Referring back to Sidorova (2019), the researcher suggested that social media has and will continue to mold the digital artsphere. One way  the researcher pointed out is the way digital artists are adapting their strategies and approaches to the environments of particular platforms.

Taking this into account, it can also be related to Jagongo and Kinyua's (2013) suggestion of how social media supports entrepreneurs in their way of cultivating and creating partnerships with potential clients or audiences. As illustrators such as Nanda (2022) has pointed out, Instagram is the place in which art directors and those behind other visual editorial mediums, are on the lookout for potential new artists to contribute to their business. Instagram remains to be one of the visually based social media environments the illustrators can showcase their art, it is also one that can be linked to external links that the illustrators have the freedom to refer to. May it be commissions, printed artwork, or logo designs, digital illustrators have adapted to the platform's affordances. This includes optimizing the features provided by the platform itself and building habits around it upon doing so.

With the world becoming ever more interconnected, social media platforms continue to play an overarching role in mass communication. Asur et al., (2011) explains that the abundance of content produced and circulated within the various social media platforms in real time is an aspect many users of said platforms will always play a role in. But how does one then stand out and ensure that their content is indeed consumed? Kairam et al., (2021) elaborates on the notion that search engines on platforms highlight what is trending, due to the sudden increase of activity surrounding particular topics or habits of the platform's users. The results of the research suggests that digital illustrators have likewise adapted this notion. On one hand, several factors observed proved that the digital artsphere as well as its art marketplace on social media is experiencing change. Instagram in particular. has become the environment in which said rapid change can be visible.

From incorporating trending topics such as the political situation in particular areas of the world, to creating and promoting NFT based artwork, the research indicates that keeping up with what is trending is a key strategy for digital illustrators. On the other hand, just how far can keeping up with trending topics be incorporated into the merits of digital illustration? One way the results suggest is that using trending hashtags that result in significant numbers may help in

gaining exposure. Not only does it build upon the earlier point of adding a "human element" into the illustrator's profile, but it also potentially leads to greater findability from other users. However, perceptions on trending topics tend to vary and that it may also lead to becoming a limiting factor rather than one that opens for new opportunities.

However, incorporating trending topics heavily depends on the platform's affordances. Instagram's dependency on hashtags have revolved around the user's way of optimizing them. While hashtags help users describe their posts, hashtags also function as a collective element where other users can see similar posts with potentially a shared theme. Hashtag use is seen as another important element for digital illustrators on Instagram. Not only does incorporating trending hashtags help tap into the topics potential audiences on the platform are engaging in, but it also helps the digital illustrator centralize art towards a specific theme. When compared to YouTube, while the platform's hashtags work in a similar way to that of Instagram's, keywords and descriptives still play an important role in gaining visibility. Despite having incorporated themes that specific audiences may be on the lookout for, there are still obstacles such as platform gatekeepers that hinder visibility growth. Despite the perception of Instagram's arbitrary algorithms, the social media platform remains to be the ideal platform for digital illustrators to achieve visibility. With continuous updates to features, real time insights and analytics, and the means for illustrators to better engage with their audiences, the strategies illustrators pick up on through Instagram may continue to develop as the platform itself progresses over time.

It can be concluded that this study successfully sheds a light in further understanding how digital illustrators are potentially using Instagram to gain further visibility. This is because the study revealed a number of different factors looking into the strategies, habits, perceptions, and trends that digital illustrators on the platform are observing. However, the study was also limited by several factors. First limitation that can be identified may be the number of digital illustrators both observed throughout the ethnography, and digital illustrators approached for interviews. With a larger number of participants involved in the study, not only could further in-depth discussions be prompt, but an increase in validity could be achieved.

Another limitation that plays a significant role is the lack of time for study. Despite resorting to digital methods and programs such as NodeXL or Instamancer helped in efficiently gathering analytic insights, additional time periods for observations being made on individual

artists could provide more context into the trends being seen. Additionally, while there was an attempt to define digital illustrators, digital illustration is a concept that holds variations in terms of art styles, purposes, and qualities. Thus, it should be noted that this study especially looks into commercial and editorial digital illustrators who work commission based and are self-represented. Moreover, research into digital illustrators that work in groups or those that are represented by an entity within the creative industries may have different perceptions or understandings.

Affordances on social media platforms, especially that of Instagram and YouTube are both evolving. Another limitation that can be considered is that insights gathered from the study may not be as applicable in the future, due to the changes or updates that either Instagram or YouTube may incorporate in the coming times. Moreover, although YouTube was only used as a comparison medium, further emphasis on the platform could provide the study more of an in-depth discussion between the two social media platforms. This could be achieved by involving a larger number of digital illustrators on YouTube to participate in the study. Lastly, the study centralizes its focus on Instagram, with YouTube becoming an additional platform to prompt discussion. However, there are several different platforms that digital illustrators may or are already using to showcase their creations or grow their services. Platforms such as Patreon that had been identified throughout the ethnographic process as a site commonly referred to by most illustrators on Instagram were one of the standout platforms illustrators could connect with audiences. Further research into the different platforms digital illustrators are on already could broaden the research into understanding how strategies and perceptions differ from illustrators on one platform to another.

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**8. Appendices**

**Appendix A. Illustrator criterion descriptives and participant overview**

**Illustrator criterion**:

The following descriptors help in narrowing down the potential illustrators to reach out to on Instagram.

**1. Digital illustrator's account should be registered as a business account:**

Through having an Instagram business account, profiles have access to various insights and data. Moreover, having a link to the digital artists' external website or shop would also benefit in understanding monetary goals.

**2. Account should have a minimum follower base of 2000 followers:**

Having a minimum of 2000 followers allows for further insights and data gathered. This would increase the chances of gaining further understanding into engagement, profile growth, and interaction.

**3. Digital illustrators Instagram profiles should be consistently uploading posts (and/or) videos on the platform:**

Given the popularity of digital illustrators opting for Instagram as a platform to showcase their creations, it is important to include those that have a consistency in posting. While posting schedules per illustrator may vary, it is important to include those that are active throughout the observation.

**4. Digital illustrators involved in the study should be an independent artist:**

It is crucial that the digital illustrators involved in the study have jurisdiction and complete control over their artistic direction and the Instagram pages they have created. As some visual art or digital illustration accounts on Instagram are set up on behalf of collectors or websites showcasing digital illustration, only profiles that belong to digital illustrators themselves will be involved in the study.

**5. Digital illustrators involved in the interview should be aged 18 and above**

**Participant overview**

| Digital illustrator | Background information |
|---|---|
| C.Holme | C.Holme is a freelance commercial digital illustrator based in England, the United Kingdom. Working for brands and editorial platforms, he started his professional career upon graduating from art school and has been doing freelance illustration work for four years since 2018. |
| A. Nanda | A.Nanda is a freelance commercial digital illustrator and art director for one of the publications within Valencia, Spain. Nanda has been doing professional illustration work since 2019 after first doing an editorial commission for The Guardian US' coverage of the 2018 US presidential elections. |

| M. Kwon | M. Kwon is a freelance commercial digital illustrator based in the US. Upon finishing studies in 3D animation, Kwon started working on illustrations in 2019. Making editorial illustrations for clients such as BusinessWeek and other news platforms. |
|---|---|
| T. Froese | T. Froese is a freelance commercial digital illustrator and teacher on SkillShare. Having started working commission based illustrations since 2008, Froese has been working professionally for 12 years. |
| I. van Heffen | Van Heffen is a freelance commercial digital illustrator based in the Netherlands. He has been working professionally for 12 years, mostly working on a number of different projects for NGO organizations. |

**Appendix B. Interview guide and topic list**

**Opening Questions:**

1.   Could you please start by introducing your art page?

2.   How long have you been making digital illustrations?

3.   How would you describe your illustrations?

4.   What inspired you to start making digital illustrations?

5.   How long has your art page been on Instagram?

**Subtheme 1) General experience on Instagram:**

1.   How would you describe your experience of using Instagram?

2.   What are some of the challenges you face when using Instagram? Could you describe the ways you overcome them?

3.   How often would you say you upload new creations on Instagram?

4.   How do you engage with your audience on Instagram?

5.   How would you describe Instagram's relationship with artists on the platform?

6.   What are some of the trends you see other digital illustrators do on Instagram? Could you describe them?

7.   Why do you think the trends happen?

8.   Have you heard of the term "shadowbanning"? (if yes) Could you maybe describe what it is?

9.   What are some of the ways you promote certain illustrations you make?

10.  What type of posts do you typically make on Instagram?

11.  What kind of products or services related to your illustrations do you sell?

**Subtheme 2) Personal goals on Instagram:**

1.   What are some of the goals you wish to achieve for your art through Instagram?

2.   How do you assess reaching those goals?

3. What are some of the insights you would need to see whether or not you reach certain goals?

4. How important are reaching the goals to you as a digital illustrator on Instagram?

5. How would you best describe your engagement with your audience?

**Subtheme 3) Tactics used:**

1. Are you using Instagram's Business Tools? (if yes) How would you describe the experience using them? (if no) Are there reasons you prefer not to?

2. Do you implement the use of hashtags on your posts? (if yes) What kind of hashtags do you normally use for your art? (if no) Are there reasons you choose not to?

3. What are some of the ways you grow your Instagram page?

4. How would you describe those ways you do that?

5. Do you contribute your art to other Instagram pages? (if yes) Could you describe them?

**Subtheme 4) Cross platform experiences:**

1. What other social media platforms do you showcase your art on? Could you describe how different they are as compared to Instagram?

2. Could you describe what you see other digital illustrators do on other platforms? Why do you think they do that?

3. What are key features you feel a platform should have to best cater to digital illustrators like yourself?

5. How would you describe the "ideal" platform for digital illustrators such as yourself?

**Appendix C. Coding process snippets**

| DOCUMENT | QUOTE | LOCATION | OPEN CODE | AXIAL CODE | SELECTIVE CODE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Transript 1 - Holme** | once I graduated from art school and then started my illustration practice, then it sort of slowly transitioned from something more personal to something more sort of, I guess client facing - it's sort of like an ongoing live portfolio almost | Page 1. Paragraph 2 | Instagram page transitioning into ongoing live portfolio | Creation of client facing profile | Instagram as a portfolio |
| **Transript 1 - Holme** | started to pull back some of the personal elements of things that I was posting | Page 1. Paragraph 2 | Pulling back on posting personal content | Creation of client facing profile | Instagram as a portfolio |
| **Transript 1 - Holme** | it's just become a little bit more formal in terms of me just putting work out there, allowing that to be discoverable. And pick up clients through that | Page 1. Paragraph 2 | Opting to create more formal profile, more professional looking to pick up clients | Creation of client facing profile | Instagram as a portfolio |
| **Transript 1 - Holme** | I graduated from art school in 2015 | Page 1. Paragraph 4 | Educated in art school | Personal experience | Professional experience |
| **Transript 1 - Holme** | seven years ago, coming up to seven years, right? Yeah, I've been in professional practice. Pretty much started straight after that, but obviously, at a very low volume. And then I think it was 2018 that I started doing illustration full time. So yeah, so probably for four years, very solidly, seven years. | Page 1. Paragraph 4 | Professional career process | Personal experience | Professional experience |
| **Transript 1 - Holme** | I've never liked emailing out or, you know, selling myself or anything like that | Page 1. Paragraph 6 | Personal habit | Motivations | Strategies |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Transript 3 - Kwon** | I guess, for Instagram is, is, I guess kind of like my version of myself online | Page 1 Paragraph 4 | Instagram is an online version of oneself | Self representation online | Strategies |
| **Transript 3 - Kwon** | I consider my web page to be more like an online portfolio. And Instagram is just kind of a place where I like to put my art. | Page 1 Paragraph 4 | Instagram is just a place for posting art | Decision on the creation of client-facing profile | Instagram as a portfolio |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Transcript 3 - Kwon** | I started Instagram as more of a personal thing. I'll be posting pictures of my friends, or sharing foods that I'm eating. Then it kind of evolved into more of an art page | Page 1 Paragraph 4 | Instagram page started out as a personal page with personal pictures, then turned into art page | Decision on seperating personal posts with art creation posts on Instagram | Instagram as a portfolio |
| **Transcript 3 - Kwon** | I was just posting a lot of sketches and my college work. | Page 1 Paragraph 4 | Mostly posting of art sketches on Instagram | Art choice on Instagram | Strategies |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Transcript 4 - Froese** | So it's balancing how I create content. You know, acknowledge the fact that YouTube is a search engine and people are looking for answers. | Page 6 Paragraph 46 | Understanding YouTube's search engine affordance helps create content creation balance | Algorithm of YouTube search engine dependency | Algorithmic gossip (positive) |
| **Transcript 4 - Froese** | it's also a place for building community and creating content for the die-hards. Right. And then. And then it should also have an element of discoverability when you're looking at your YouTube homepage and the algorithm selects it | Page 6 Paragraph 52 | YouTube videos should have an element of discoverability so algorithm picks it up | YouTube videos must be able to be picked up by platform's algorithms | Algorithmic gossip (positive) |
| **Transcript 4 - Froese** | I'm always trying to figure out how to optimize my content for the YouTube format or for the YouTube platform. And I'm very slowly somewhat ultimately becoming more advanced in how I approach that. | Page 6 Paragraph 52 | Optimizing videos help in gaining discoverability | Optimizing content | Strategies |

**Appendix E. Informed consent form**

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

| | |
|---|---|
| Project Title and version | How are digital illustrators using Instagram to gain visibility? |
| Name of | Brodie Bavidge |

| | |
|---|---|
| Principal Investigator | |
| Name of Organization | Erasmus University Rotterdam |
| Purpose of the Study | To gain an understanding into how digital illustrators are using Instagram to gain visibility over their work and to reach other particular goals. The aim is to present a discussion into the different ways Instagram as a platform may cater to a specific niche of creators as well as their audiences. |
| Procedures | This interview will last for at least 45 minutes and will be conducted digitally through Google Meets call. |
| Potential and anticipated Risks and Discomforts | There are no obvious physical, legal or economic risks associated with participating in this study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time. |
| Potential Benefits | Participation in this study does not guarantee any beneficial results to you. As a result of participating you may better understand how digital illustrators can or are using Instagram to gain further visibility. |
| Sharing the results | Research findings such as quotes will be used only within the research paper. |
| Confidentiality | Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. No personally identifiable information will be reported in any research product. Moreover, only trained research staff will have access to your responses. Within these restrictions, results of this study will be made available to you upon request. |

| | |
|---|---|
| | As indicated above, this research project involves making audio recordings of interviews with you. Transcribed segments from the audio recordings may be used in published forms (e.g., journal articles and book chapters).<br><br>In the case of publication, pseudonyms will be used if requested. The audio recordings, forms, and other documents created or collected as part of this study will be stored in a secure location in the researchers' offices or on the researchers password-protected computers and will be destroyed within ten years of the initiation of the study. |
| Compensation | - |
| Right to Withdraw and Questions | Your participation in this research is completely voluntary.  You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time.<br><br>If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify. |
| Statement of Consent | Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree that you will participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.<br><br>For research problems or any other question regarding the research project, the Data Protection Officer of Erasmus University, Marlon Domingus, MA (fg@eur.nl)<br><br>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below. |
| Audio recording | I consent to have my interview audio recorded |

| | |
|---|---|
| (if applicable) | ☐ yes<br><br>☐ no |
| Secondary use<br><br>(if applicable) | I consent to have the anonymised data be used for secondary analysis<br><br>☐ yes<br><br>☐ no |
| Signature and Date | <table><tr><td>NAME PARTICIPANT</td><td>NAME PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR<br><br>Brodie Bavidge</td></tr><tr><td>SIGNATURE</td><td>SIGNATURE</td></tr><tr><td>DATE</td><td>DATE</td></tr></table> |