Decoding Social Media Al__r_th_s

You can say whatever you want on social media. Problem is, you have NO idea who's actually listening! The honest truth is that complicated mathematical algorithms determine who gets to see your posts. It's not necessarily your ideal audience, their look-alikes, or even your own followers.

By 2023, Mark Zuckerberg noted that, more than *20% of content in a person's Facebook and Instagram feeds is now recommended by AI from people, groups, or accounts they don't follow.*

But first, what are SM algorithms?

Social media algorithms are basically a set of rules and calculations that determines who should be shown which posts and in what order. Strictly speaking, social media algorithms include everything from facial recognition, language translation, and audio transcription, to content moderation etc. However, the scope of this playbook is the algorithm behind content 'recommendation engines' on social media.

Who needs algorithms anyway?

Though algorithms often leave us with more questions than answers, they are immensely beneficial to all key stakeholders. Here's how.

Platform PoV

Helps retain users by serving them more of what they are likely to enjoy and engage with.

Brand marketer PoV

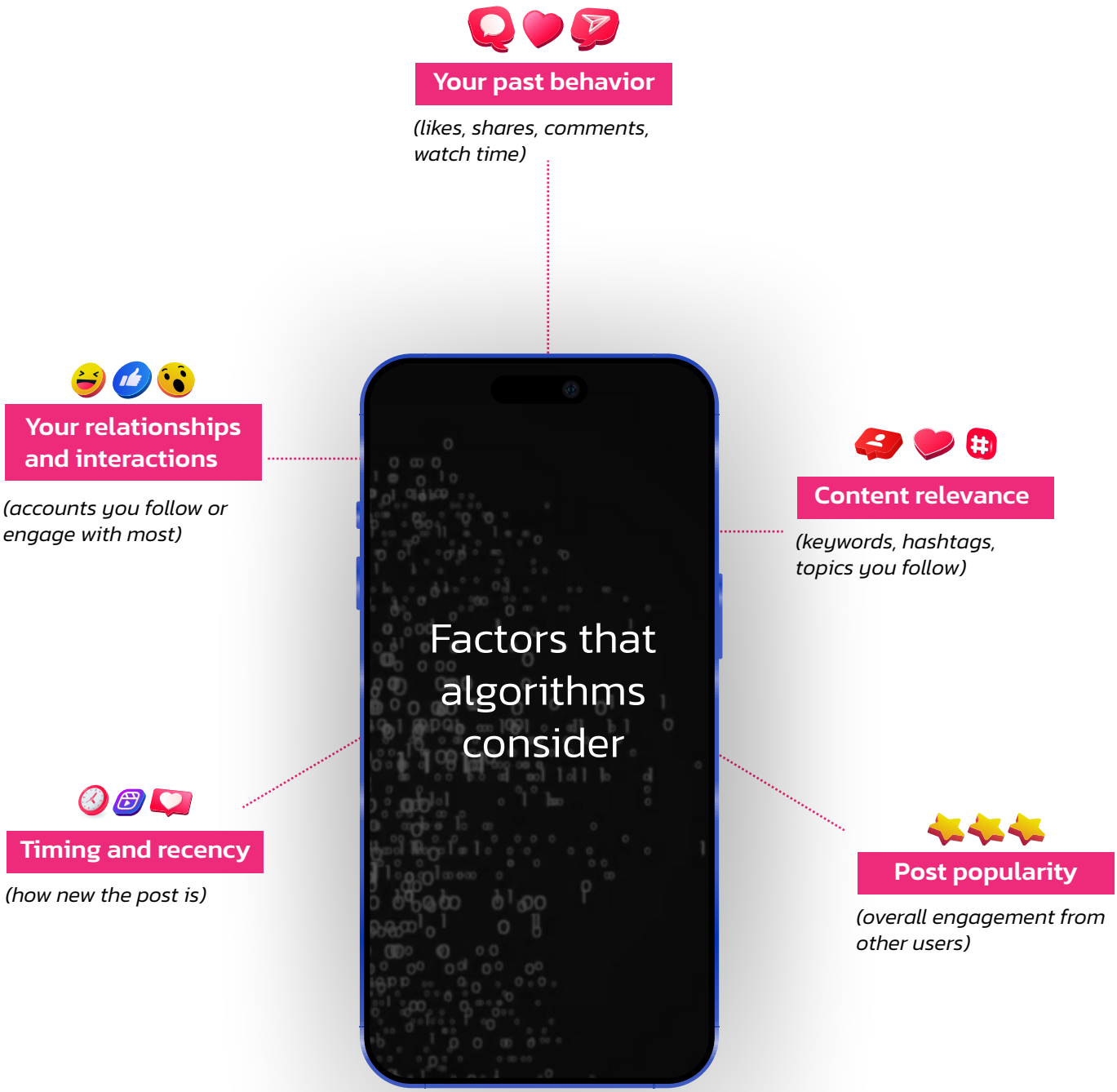
Gets discovered by audiences that are genuinely interested in their content without having to acquire them as followers first.

User PoV

More customised content without having to go in search of it.

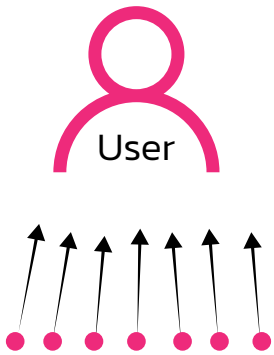
Everyone's happy, right?

Not so fast. Because to do this math, platforms like Instagram and LinkedIn need to monitor specific (and often erratic) user behaviour. Typically –



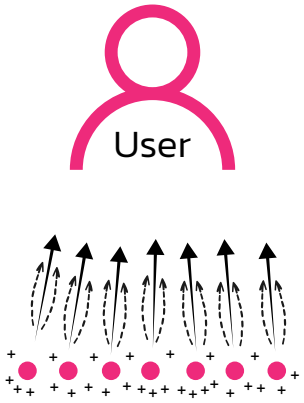
Myths vs facts of SM algorithms

Remember the time when we subscribed to or followed certain handles and saw posts only from those we subscribed to? That's where it all began. But then how did we make the leap from there to the 'blackbox' of algorithms? To get closer to understanding how algorithms work today, let's take a few steps back and look at the evolution of recommendation mechanisms.



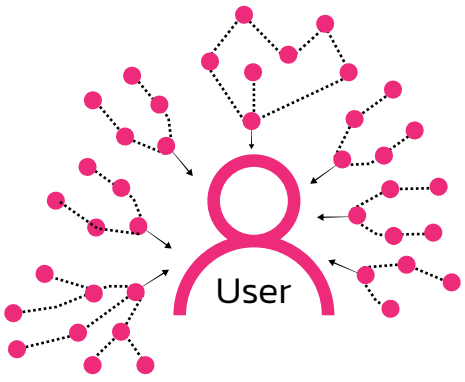
Subscription Model

Social media platforms started with the **subscription model,** where users see content only from handles they subscribe to or 'follow'.



Network Model

Then came the more evolved **network model,** where users see content from handles they subscribe to and other content shared by the handles the user subscribes to.



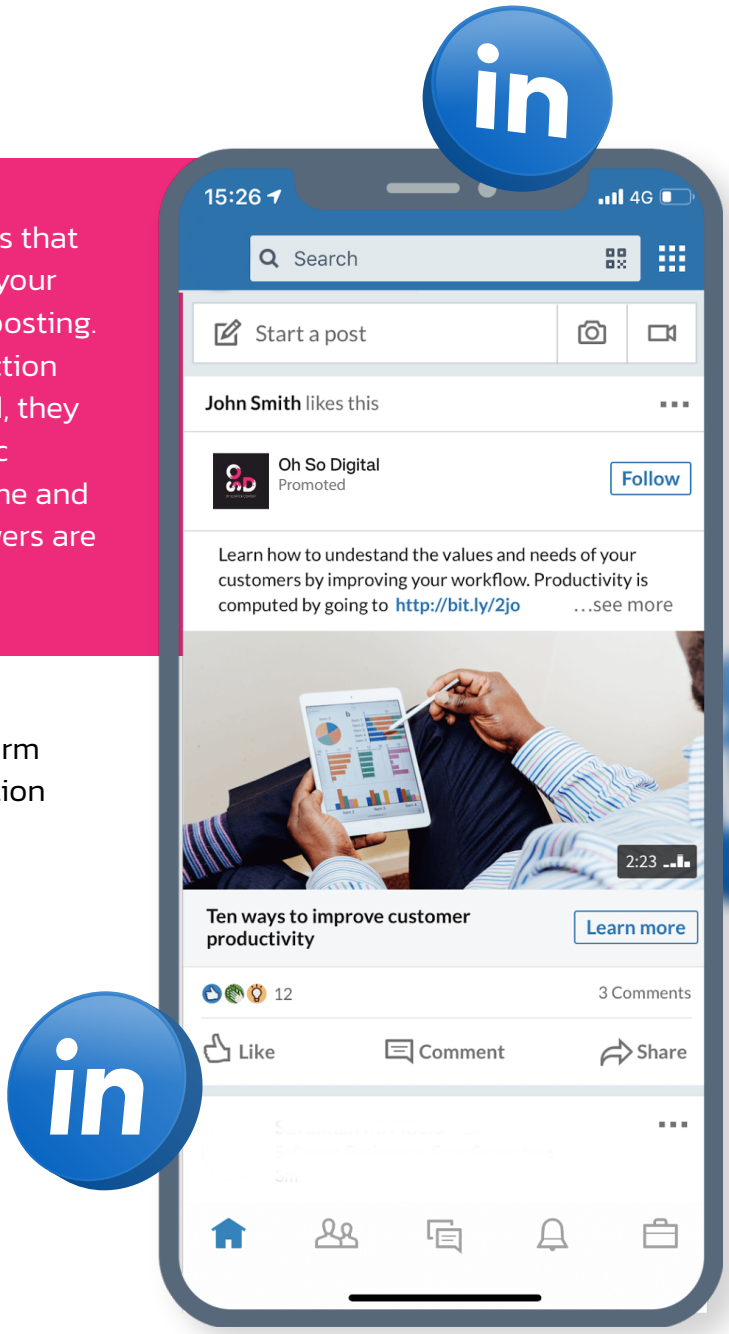
Algorithmic Model

The latest is the **algorithmic model,** where the user sees content that the platform (like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok etc.) estimates that the user will like.

A good example of the algorithmic model is TikTok's 'For You' feed. Essentially, it is a feed where TikTok serves each user a completely customised feed of content that the platform thinks the user will like based on their 'interactions and engagement with the app'. Here's a breakdown of how it works, if you'd like to understand this more deeply.

If you are an X user, formerly 'Twitter', you will see two versions of your feed – 'For You' (algorithmic) and 'Following' (Subscription-Network based). Interestingly, the default feed when you launch the app is the algorithmic one.

An interesting piece by Hootsuite explains that LinkedIn shows your post to a handful of your followers within the first 'golden' hour of posting. Then the platform assesses the initial traction your post receives. If the response is good, they will deem the post fit for wider algorithmic distribution. If this is the case, then the time and date of posting (when most current followers are active) are crucial to virality.



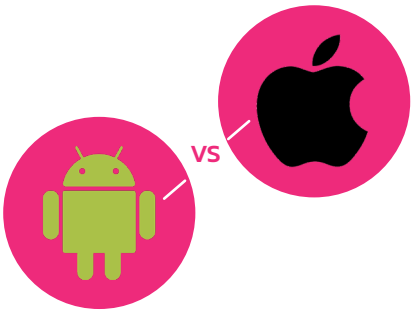
Having said this, we must know that no platform is completely algorithmic in its recommendation of content to users. Currently at least, it is a hybrid between 'Network' and 'Algorithm'.

Here are some massive questions to think about.

We mentioned how social media platform X, (ex-Twitter), has two optional feeds – 'for you' where the algorithm serves up content that it thinks the user will like based on past behaviour, and 'following' populated with content from the handles the user is actively following. Say 10 years down the line, if algorithms get good enough to serve users with exactly the content they would themselves seek out, will that eliminate the need to 'follow' anyone? Will follows and connection requests be things of the past? How will that affect performance metrics and influencer marketing?

In the same vein, how will content creators be affected by an increasing 'algorithmic' shift? Right now, creators focus on building their network and they know that brand endorsement deals are at least partially influenced by the size of their network. But in a dominantly algorithmic feed, who the creator's content is shown to, has nothing to do with the number of subscribers the creator has. What new areas do creators then need to focus on and how do brands choose their collaborations? Will the next frontier of brand collaboration be based on content buckets, rather than individuals?

Of late, there has been talk of algorithms working differently on Android devices vs Apple ones. Unsubstantiated reels have been doing the rounds on how ride sharing apps may charge higher fares to iPhone users than say Samsung handset users. While nowhere is this officially declared, it is possible that it is true, because data collection methods differ between Android and iOS, due in part to Apple's stricter privacy policies.



Here's what you can do

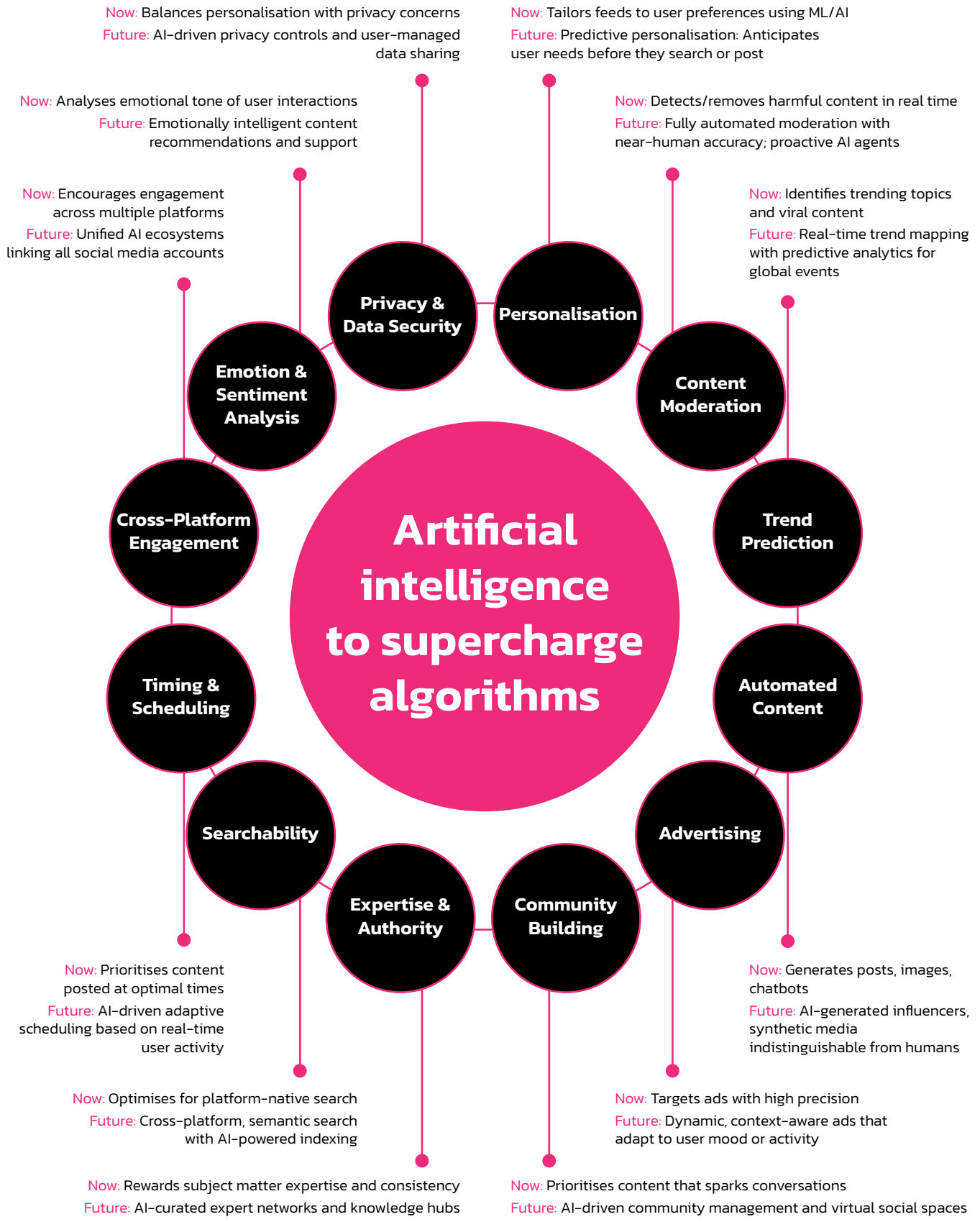
If you are a brand marketer who has a lot of media money riding on the whims of algorithms, here is what you might consider:

- Engagement metrics of influencers > Follower count
- Collaborations with handles / creators delivering niche content so that whether the algorithm chooses by network or content, you hit home
- Content and SEO > hashtags
- Customising content format to platform priorities > creating one big content asset and deploying it across multiple platforms

On the other hand, if you are a brand marketer focusing on organic content, consider the following:

- Studying user behaviour of your audience > studying increase in number of followers
- Focusing on search intent > focusing on what your brand wants to say
- Focusing on saves > focusing on likes

AI has a profound influence on algorithms and recommendation engines. Here is what's happening now, and what we might see in the near future.



FAQs:

Are platforms just trying to mess with us by using mysterious algorithms?

No; they are trying to retain users by serving up content that they would really enjoy and engage with.

How do algorithms treat B2B and B2C brands differently?

B2C brands typically benefit from frequent, visually engaging, and emotionally resonant content (e.g., memes, influencer collaborations, product showcases) that drives high-volume interactions like likes, shares, and comments. Algorithms on platforms like Instagram and Facebook often reward this high engagement with greater reach.

In contrast, B2B brands usually target niche, professional audiences with value-driven content such as whitepapers, webinars, and thought leadership articles. Engagement for B2B is often lower in volume but higher in quality and relevance, focusing on building trust and generating leads rather than viral reach.

Should low-performing posts be boosted to get more engagement or high-performing posts to reach more people with our best content?

Low performing posts should be boosted only if the content had strong intent but didn't catch the algorithm. Boosting poor content without tweaking creative or audience targeting is a wasted spend.

On the other hand, if a post has already organically performed well, it's a signal that the content resonates. Boosting it amplifies something that's already working and could help find lookalike audiences.

How are algorithms affected by posts in languages other than English? How, for example, will a Hindi post be treated differently from a post in English?

Multilingual and code-mixed content (posts using a mix of languages like Hindi and English) present additional challenges for algorithms, as language detection and content understanding become more complex. Platforms are improving in this area, but accuracy and nuance in recommendations may still lag behind English-only content.

What is one lesser-known rule of algorithms?

There is no full-proof way of knowing, but it is very likely that diversity and feed balance matter. To avoid overwhelming users with content from the same source, algorithms diversify feeds by mixing content from different creators, topics, and formats.

Good Reads:
Hootsuite's Social media algorithms guide | Meta on content recommendations on Facebook and Instagram

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