

Phase 2: User Research

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Step 1

The Research Readout - Objective/Methodology, Insights, and Hypothesis check

Section 1

Research Objective

To understand how users experience Instagram as a platform for content discovery, everyday scrolling, posting, and communication; identify the main pain points in how Feed, Reels, and Explore surface content; and evaluate whether users feel the platform understands and adapts to their evolving interests.

Type	Method	Nos.	Context
Primary	User Interviews	5	Interviews covered five distinct Instagram behavior segments: passive content consumer, active poster/story sharer, small business creator, DM-first user, and discovery-driven browser. These interviews explored real usage behavior, frictions, workarounds, and emotional responses to Instagram's feed, Reels, discovery, posting, and messaging experience. [Raw Notes + Interview questions asked]
Primary	User Survey	16	Survey responses were collected from Instagram users with varying usage patterns. The survey focused on content discovery behavior, frequency of discovering new creators, where users find content they like, how often they see repetitive or irrelevant content, what they do when recommendations go wrong, and what improvements they want most. [Survey Data]
Secondary	Platform Analysis	21	Synthesized sentiment and usage patterns from Instagram user interviews and survey responses, highlighting recurring frictions in content discovery, recommendation quality, posting behavior, messaging clutter, and personalization.

Section 2

Insights from Users (The Evidence)

Insight 1: Discovery is engaging, but relevance breaks quickly	THE QUAL (VOICE OF THE USER) “I remember seeing too many random videos that didn’t feel relevant. Then suddenly I got one really funny reel, and after that I kept hoping the next one would also be good.” - Aanya	THE QUANT (SCALE OF PROBLEM) 14 out of 16 respondents (88%) said Instagram showed them repetitive, irrelevant, or misaligned content at least sometimes in the past 30 days; 5 out of 16 (31%) said this happened often or very often.
Insight 2: Users usually scroll through bad recommendations instead of actively fixing them	THE QUAL (VOICE OF THE USER) “I just kept scrolling fast. I don’t really click ‘not interested’ or anything. I just skip.” - Aanya	OBSERVED BEHAVIOR (WORKAROUND) The most common survey response was “Keep scrolling and hope it improves” (7/16), compared with “Use ‘Not Interested’” (6/16). This suggests users often cope passively rather than trusting Instagram’s control tools.
Insight 3: Instagram works for quick discovery, but struggles with novelty over time	THE QUAL (VOICE OF THE USER) “At first it was good, but after some time everything started looking the same... Instagram gives me trendy things, but not always fresh things.” - Sana	THE QUANT (SCALE OF PROBLEM) While 9 out of 16 respondents said the last creator or post they genuinely liked came from the Reels feed, open-ended survey responses repeatedly asked Instagram to improve relevance, adapt faster to changing interests, and make it easier to reset or refine recommendations.
Insight 4: Users switch to other apps when Instagram does not meet their need	THE QUAL (VOICE OF THE USER) “I switched to Pinterest. That happens a lot actually.” - Sana “I reposted it to my Story, added a poll, and later shared it in WhatsApp too.” - Mehak	OBSERVED BEHAVIOR (WORKAROUND) Users move across apps depending on the job to be done - Pinterest for deeper inspiration, WhatsApp for reach and sharing, and Instagram mainly for quick discovery and distribution. This shows Instagram is often one part of a broader cross-platform journey.

Insight 5: Posting creates pressure, not just expression

THE QUAL (VOICE OF THE USER)

"I usually delete and repost, or I don't post at all. Sometimes I send it to a friend first and ask if it's fine." - Rohan

OBSERVED BEHAVIOR (WORKAROUND)

Repeated checking of viewers, deleting and reposting, and seeking reassurance before posting show that Instagram posting is tied to **social validation** and **self-presentation pressure**, not just casual sharing.

Insight 6: For some users, Instagram is more of a messaging app than a content app

THE QUAL (VOICE OF THE USER)

"I think people say Instagram is a posting app, but for me it's more like a messaging app with too many other things inside it." - Arjun

OBSERVED BEHAVIOR (WORKAROUND)

Users who rely on DMs report that memes, notes, reactions, and real conversations get mixed together. Arjun's workaround - manually searching for people or replying late because messages get buried - points to friction in Instagram's communication layer.

Insight 7: Users want stronger personalization controls, not just better recommendations

THE QUAL (VOICE OF THE USER)

"The platform doesn't give enough control over what I want to see. 'Not interested' feedback doesn't work effectively, and the feed quickly goes back to irrelevant content." Survey respondent

THE QUANT (SCALE OF PROBLEM)

Across open-ended responses, the strongest recurring asks were: **choose interest areas more clearly, reset suggested content easily, make 'Not Interested' work better, and improve recommendation accuracy.**

This indicates a control problem as much as a relevance problem.

Hypothesis Check (where we are now)

VALIDATED (2)

1. Discovery relevance is a real problem: Confirmed. Survey responses show that **14 out of 16 users** experienced repetitive, irrelevant, or misaligned content at least sometimes in the last 30 days, and interviews echoed the same pattern of random or repetitive recommendations. Aanya described seeing “too many random videos” before occasionally finding something good.

2. Users feel low control over personalization: Confirmed. Both interviews and survey responses show that users do not feel they can meaningfully shape what Instagram shows them. Aanya said she mostly just skips irrelevant content because she assumes the app will show “whatever it wants,” and several survey responses asked for better reset options, stronger interest controls, and a more effective “Not Interested” feature.

INVALIDATED (2)

1. Explore is the main discovery surface: False. In the survey, the most common place where users found the last creator or post they genuinely liked was the **Reels feed (9/16)**, while **Explore accounted for only 2/16**. This suggests the discovery problem is more about **Reels-led recommendations** than Explore-led browsing.

2. Users actively correct the algorithm when it goes wrong: False. We expected users to proactively train or fix the feed, but the survey suggests otherwise. The most common behavior was simply to **keep scrolling and hope it improves (7/16)**, slightly ahead of using **“Not Interested” (6/16)**. Passive coping is more common than active correction.

DISCOVERED NEW (3)

1. Instagram serves multiple jobs, not just discovery: New finding. Interviews showed that Instagram is not only a content discovery product; it also acts as a boredom app, a social validation space, a business storefront, and a messaging tool. Arjun described it as “more like a messaging app,” while Mehak described it as essential to her business.

2. Posting pressure emerged as a separate friction: New finding. One of the strongest unexpected themes was that posting itself creates anxiety and self-monitoring. Rohan described deleting and reposting Stories, sending content to friends for reassurance, and repeatedly checking who viewed his post.

3. Cross-platform switching is part of the natural journey:

New finding. Users do not stay inside Instagram when it stops meeting their need. Sana switches to **Pinterest** for fresher inspiration, while Mehak extends reach through **WhatsApp** when Instagram alone is not enough. This suggests Instagram operates as one part of a broader cross-platform behavior pattern.

Step 2

Competitive check table for each validated problem

VALIDATED PROBLEM	COMPETITOR	WHAT THEY HAVE DONE	WHAT IT TELLS YOU
Users feel low control over what Instagram recommends. Discovery happens, but once Feed / Reels start becoming repetitive or irrelevant, users mostly cope by skipping or switching apps instead of feeling they can meaningfully improve the system. This was validated in both the interviews and survey.	TikTok	TikTok has made recommendation control more explicit. Users can refresh their For You feed, use Why this video to access Adjust your For You, and manage topics with sliders to see more or less of specific themes.	This suggests the problem is real enough that a direct competitor has productized a visible reset + tuning layer, not just passive “Not Interested” feedback. It also shows that users benefit when recommendation control is framed as an active, understandable system rather than a buried signal.

Users feel low control over what Instagram recommends.

Discovery happens, but once Feed / Reels start becoming repetitive or irrelevant, users mostly cope by skipping or switching apps instead of feeling they can meaningfully improve the system.

Pinterest

Pinterest gives users a more transparent recommendation-tuning model. Users can **tune their home feed**, turn recommendations from specific **Pins, boards, interests, or followed accounts** on or off, and can also see **why they’re seeing a Pin** before choosing to hide it or refine recommendations further.

This suggests there is strong value in giving users **fine-grained, legible controls** over recommendation inputs. Pinterest treats evolving taste as normal and lets users directly edit the signals shaping the feed; that makes the system feel more steerable than Instagram’s current experience.

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What Instagram already has

Instagram does offer some controls today: users can mark suggested posts as **Not interested**, hide suggested posts from certain accounts or words, adjust **Sensitive Content Control**, and since late 2024 it has introduced **Reset suggested content** across Explore, Reels, and Feed.

The whitespace is not “missing controls,” but **weak visibility, weak trust, and weak perceived effectiveness**. Your interviews support this: users either do not know these controls well enough, or do not believe they work consistently. That makes the opportunity less about inventing a brand-new feature and more about making control **clearer, faster, and more confidence-building**.

Step 1: Group your validated problems by the business metric they affect

METRIC	WHAT IT MEASURES	PROBLEMS POINT HERE WHEN...
Retention	Users continuing to use the product over time	Discovery becomes repetitive, less relevant, and harder to steer over time. Users keep opening Instagram, but the experience feels less fresh and less rewarding, leading them to disengage or shift parts of their journey to other apps.
Engagement	How often and how deeply existing users interact	Sessions continue, but often in a shallow or effortful way. Users skip through irrelevant content, monitor Story views repeatedly, delete and repost, or struggle with cluttered DMs instead of engaging smoothly.
Activation	New users experiencing real value for the first time	Users do not quickly feel that Instagram understands their interests. When Feed, Reels, or Explore surface repetitive or mismatched content early, the product may fail to create a strong “this is for me” moment.
Monetisation	Revenue generated from users	Creators and small businesses rely on Instagram, but unclear feedback on what works reduces confidence in the platform as a dependable channel for growth, which can weaken willingness to invest more time, effort, or spend.
Referral	Users bringing in other users	Users may still share content from Instagram, but repetitive discovery, weak freshness, and posting pressure reduce the likelihood of recommending Instagram as the best platform for finding relevant and inspiring content.

Step 2: Decide which cluster to focus on

1. Which cluster has the strongest evidence?

The **retention cluster** has the strongest evidence.

This is the one area that showed up most clearly and consistently across both the interviews and the survey. In the interviews, users repeatedly described Instagram discovery as something that starts well but becomes repetitive, random, or less useful over time. Aanya described seeing too many irrelevant videos

and simply skipping through them, while Sana said Instagram is good for quick inspiration but starts to feel repetitive and pushes her to Pinterest when she wants something fresher.

The survey supports the same pattern. Most respondents said Instagram had shown them repetitive or irrelevant content at least sometimes in the last 30 days, and when that happened, the most common reaction was not to actively fix the feed but to keep scrolling and hope it improves. That makes this more than a one-off annoyance - it is a repeated experience that slowly reduces the quality of using Instagram over time.

Compared with other clusters, this one had the clearest consistency:

- **Engagement** did show up through posting pressure and DM clutter, but these were more segment-specific
- **Monetisation** appeared mainly through the creator/business interview
- **Activation** showed up weakly, but not as the dominant theme

So the strongest evidence cluster is:

Discovery becomes less relevant, less fresh, and less steerable over time.

2. Which cluster, if solved, most directly moves the business?

Again, the **retention cluster** is the clearest answer.

Instagram is already a mature product with strong usage. That means the business value does not come mainly from helping people discover the app for the first time, but from making sure they continue to return, continue to trust what they see, and continue to find value in staying within Instagram instead of shifting key parts of their journey elsewhere.

Your research shows that when discovery quality drops:

- users keep scrolling, but in a low-value way
- users feel less in control of what they see
- users switch to other apps like Pinterest or WhatsApp for specific needs
- creators feel dependent on a system they do not fully trust

That matters because Instagram's business depends on sustained user attention, repeated usage, and continued creator participation. If users stop feeling that Instagram helps them discover relevant and fresh content, the product may still get opens and time spent in the short term, but the long-term strength of the habit weakens.

So the cluster that both has the strongest evidence **and** most directly moves the business is:

Focus cluster

Retention - specifically, the decline in discovery quality over time caused by repetitive recommendations, weak freshness, and low user control over personalization.

Step 3: Write your goal statement

“Improve retention and engagement for discovery-driven Instagram users by making recommendations feel more relevant, fresh, and user-steerable over time.”

Instagram Problem Clustering and Goal

VALIDATED PROBLEM	SHORT LABEL	BUSINESS METRIC	WHY IT BELONGS HERE
Instagram discovery becomes repetitive and less relevant over time, making browsing feel less rewarding.	Discovery loses relevance	Retention	This affects whether users continue to rely on Instagram over time for discovery. When the feed feels repetitive, users disengage or shift parts of their journey elsewhere.
Users feel they have low control over what Instagram recommends, and correction tools do not feel effective enough.	Low personalization control	Retention	If users do not feel they can meaningfully improve the experience, trust in the platform weakens over repeated use.
Users cope with bad recommendations by skipping rapidly, scrolling passively, or mentally checking out instead of engaging intentionally.	Passive scrolling behavior	Engagement	The app is still being used, but the depth and quality of interaction decline. This is a weaker form of engagement, not a full retention loss yet.
Posting creates pressure through repeated checking, self-monitoring, deleting, and reposting.	Posting pressure	Engagement	This affects how comfortably and how often users actively participate, especially in Stories and posting behavior.

Important messages get buried in DMs because memes, notes, reactions, and conversations are mixed together.	DM clutter	Engagement	Users still use Instagram messaging, but the friction reduces the quality and smoothness of interaction.
Creators and small businesses do not know what is actually working, even after putting effort into content.	Creator uncertainty	Monetisation	This affects trust in Instagram as a dependable growth channel and can reduce willingness to invest more time, effort, or money into the platform.
Users switch to Pinterest or WhatsApp when Instagram does not meet their inspiration or sharing needs.	Cross-platform switching	Retention	This shows Instagram is losing parts of the user journey over time, which weakens long-term platform centrality.

Why the Retention cluster:

- **Strongest evidence:** The clearest and most repeated pattern across both interviews and survey responses was that Instagram discovery becomes repetitive, less relevant, and harder to steer over time. Users consistently described skipping through poor recommendations, feeling low control over personalization, and switching to other apps when Instagram stops meeting their need.
- **Directly moves the business:** Retention is critical because Instagram's long-term value depends on users continuing to return, trust the feed, and rely on the platform for discovery and engagement. When discovery quality declines over time, habit strength weakens, cross-platform leakage increases, and the platform becomes less central to the user journey.

Step 4

One to two personas each with a completed relevance check

Example Persona

Sana Mehra

Discovery-driven Instagram user • Uses Instagram for fast visual inspiration, but leaves when discovery stops feeling fresh

Goals and motivations

- Wants Instagram to help her quickly discover outfit ideas, styling references, and visual inspiration
- Uses the app to find content that feels relevant to her current taste and mood
- Expects Instagram to surface new creators and ideas without too much manual effort
- Wants discovery to stay fresh over time, not just work for a few minutes

Behaviors

- Opens Instagram when looking for inspiration for events, outfits, or creative references
- Starts with Explore or creator pages, then keeps opening similar profiles
- Saves posts into folders to organize ideas she likes
- Continues browsing until recommendations start feeling repetitive
- Switches to Pinterest when she wants something fresher or more varied

Frustrations

- Discovery starts well, but quickly becomes repetitive
- Content often feels trendy, but not fresh or surprising
- Saving posts helps organize ideas, but does not improve future recommendations
- Instagram does not adapt well enough when her interests shift
- She has to leave Instagram to finish the job elsewhere

A direct quote

“Instagram is great for quick inspiration, but not always for deep inspiration. After a point it starts repeating itself.”

Relevance check

Yes. Sana is directly in the chosen goal cluster because her regular Instagram usage puts her in repeated contact with the core problem: discovery loses freshness and relevance over time. She does not struggle to understand Instagram or start using it. The friction appears after repeated use, when the app stops feeling useful enough for deeper discovery and she switches to another platform. That makes her highly relevant to a goal around improving retention and engagement for discovery-driven Instagram users.

Optional second persona

Aanya Khanna

Light, frequent Instagram browser • Uses Instagram as a default break-time app, but often ends up in low-quality scrolling

Goals and motivations

- Wants quick entertainment and light mental breaks during downtime
- Expects Instagram to show enjoyable content with minimal effort
- Uses the app to relax, not to actively manage or train the feed
- Wants browsing to feel rewarding, not draining

Behaviors

- Opens Instagram during breaks or after dinner with no specific content goal
- Scrolls Reels for longer than intended
- Skips irrelevant videos quickly instead of trying to fix the feed
- Rarely uses control tools because she does not think they will make much difference

Frustrations

- Sees too many random or weakly relevant videos before finding something good
- Discovery feels inconsistent and hard to control
- Sessions become longer than intended without feeling satisfying
- She keeps using Instagram, but often in a passive, low-value way

A direct quote

“Sometimes I open it to relax, but I leave feeling like I wasted time. It’s fun in the moment, but not always satisfying after.”

Relevance check

Yes. Aanya also fits the chosen cluster because she represents the repeated-use side of the problem. She keeps returning to Instagram, but discovery quality is inconsistent and she feels little control over improving it. Her experience shows how weak recommendation quality hurts both engagement quality and long-term habit strength, even when the app is still being opened frequently.

Step 5

PIF scoring table, selected P0 with rationale, and written P0 problem statement

Instagram PIF Scoring - Discovery / Retention + Engagement Cluster

PROBLEM	P	I	F	TOTAL	REASONING
Discovery becomes repetitive and irrelevant over time Users open Instagram to discover new content, but Reels / Explore gradually start showing repetitive, weakly relevant, or misaligned posts.	5	4	5	14	Affects a large share of the target segment. In the survey, 14 of 16 respondents said Instagram showed repetitive or irrelevant content at least sometimes in the last 30 days, and interviews echoed the same pattern. It is not always severe enough to make users quit immediately, but it consistently lowers session quality and weakens long-term trust in discovery. Aanya described “too many random videos,” while Sana said the experience starts repeating itself over time.
Users feel low control over personalization When Instagram starts showing the wrong kind of content, users do not feel they can meaningfully steer it back.	5	4	4	13	This affects most discovery-driven users because bad recommendations are common and correction tools feel weak. The survey shows the most common reaction is to keep scrolling and hope it improves, not actively fix the feed. In the interviews, Aanya said she mostly skips because she assumes the app will show “whatever it wants.” This creates frustration and weakens trust, but it is slightly less frequent than the discovery-quality problem itself because it usually appears once the feed has already gone off track.
Users cope passively instead of engaging intentionally Instead of discovering actively, users skip rapidly, keep scrolling, or mentally check out when the feed quality drops.	4	3	5	12	This happens very often, but it is more of a behavioral consequence than the clearest root problem. It affects many users and shows up frequently, especially in low-quality Reels sessions. However, the intensity is slightly lower because users still remain in the app rather than fully abandoning it. Aanya’s interview is the clearest example of this passive coping loop.

Discovery lacks freshness and depth over time

Instagram helps users find quick inspiration, but not enough novelty to keep discovery feeling rewarding as tastes evolve.

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This affects a meaningful subset of discovery-driven users, especially those using Instagram for inspiration. The pain is real, but it is somewhat narrower than broad relevance breakdown. Sana's switch to Pinterest shows the problem clearly, but this appears more strongly in one segment than across the full sample.

Write your P0 Problem Statement

[User segment] are struggling with [specific problem] because [root cause]. This leads to [negative impact on the user] and [negative impact on the business].

P0 PROBLEM STATEMENT - INSTAGRAM

Discovery-driven Instagram users are struggling with finding consistently relevant and fresh content because recommendations become repetitive over time and users lack effective control to steer personalization when the feed goes off track. This leads to lower-quality discovery sessions, passive scrolling, and cross-platform switching for users, and weaker retention and engagement quality for the business.

Raw Notes + Interview Questions Asked

Instagram User Research
Raw Notes + Interview Questions Asked

Prepared for Step 1 Research Readout

Interview Questions Asked

- Before we talk about Instagram, can you tell me what role social media / online sharing / discovery plays in your everyday life right now?
- Tell me about the last time you opened Instagram and used it. Walk me through exactly what happened.
- What were you looking for when you opened it?
- Was there any moment where the experience did not go smoothly?
- What did you do when that happened?
- Have you ever tried changing how you use Instagram to improve what you see or the results you get?
- How do you know whether that actually works?
- What happens after you post / scroll / share / discover something on Instagram?
- Do you use any other platforms when Instagram does not meet that need?
- Is there anything about how you use Instagram that you wish I had asked about?

Raw Notes from 5 User Interviews

Interview 1 - Passive Content Consumer (Aanya, 24, consulting)

- Uses Instagram as a default break-time app when tired, waiting, or bored.
- Opens the app without a clear goal; primarily seeks quick entertainment.
- Reels session extended to nearly 40 minutes without conscious intent.
- Feed often feels random or irrelevant, but occasional good content keeps her scrolling.
- Main workaround is fast skipping rather than using controls like “Not Interested.”
- Feels low sense of control over what Instagram shows.
- Post-usage emotion is mixed: enjoyable in the moment but sometimes feels like wasted time afterward.

Interview 2 - Active Poster / Story Sharer (Rohan, 22, student)

- Uses Stories and DMs to stay socially connected and visible.

- Recently posted a Story from a café and repeatedly checked who had viewed it.
- Tracks responses from specific people, not just overall views.
- Posting creates self-presentation pressure: worries about quality and posting too often.
- Sometimes deletes and reposts content or sends it to a friend first for reassurance.
- Engagement affects mood more than expected.
- Posting feels less like sharing freely and more like ensuring the post ‘lands well.’

Interview 3 - Small Business / Creator (Mehak, 29, home-baking business)

- Instagram is a core business channel and acts like a storefront.
- Creates Reels with significant effort: filming, editing, captioning, hashtags, and timing.
- Measures success through views, likes, and especially DMs/orders.
- When a post underperforms, amplifies it via Stories, polls, and WhatsApp sharing.
- Has experimented with posting times, trending audio, and caption styles.
- Finds it hard to tell what actually drives performance.
- Feels dependent on Instagram but does not fully trust the platform’s feedback loop.

Interview 4 - DM-First User (Arjun, 26, software engineer)

- Rarely posts publicly; uses Instagram mainly for DMs, memes, and staying in touch.
- Typical usage starts from a Reel sent by a friend, then expands into replying and resharing.
- DMs are the main product value for him, more than feed or posting.
- Important messages often get buried under memes, reactions, notes, and casual replies.
- Workarounds include searching for people manually or replying late.
- Pinning chats helps only slightly; inbox still feels cluttered.
- Sees Instagram as a messaging app with too many overlapping functions.

Interview 5 - Discovery / Aspirational Browsing (Sana, 21, fashion student)

- Uses Instagram heavily for style, photography, and trend inspiration.
- Starts discovery journeys in Explore by opening creators and adjacent profiles.
- Initial discovery is strong, but results become repetitive over time.
- Sees repeated aesthetics, poses, and trends instead of genuinely fresh inspiration.
- Frequently switches to Pinterest when she wants broader or deeper discovery.
- Uses saved folders to organize content, but saving does not seem to improve discovery quality.
- Perceives Instagram as strong for quick inspiration but weaker for novelty and depth.

Cross-Interview Patterns Observed

- Instagram serves multiple jobs: entertainment, self-expression, business promotion, communication, and inspiration.
- Users often feel low control or low clarity around how content and outcomes are determined.
- Workarounds are common: fast skipping, deleting and reposting, cross-posting to WhatsApp, manual search in DMs, and switching to Pinterest.
- Emotional effects are significant: guilt, pressure, uncertainty, dependence, and frustration appear across segments.
- Discovery is fast and engaging, but many users describe it as repetitive, unstable, or difficult to influence.