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# Algorithmic Pragmatic Rationality: Street-Level Entrepreneurship in the Bazaar Economy on TikTok

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**Abstract**

Second-generation social media platforms such as TikTok have become key infrastructures for the economic participation of street-level entrepreneurs operating within the bazaar economies of the Global South. In these contexts, characterized by heterogeneous economic forms shaped by pragmatism and adaptability, the ability to interpret and interact with TikTok's algorithm is essential. Street-level entrepreneurs' capacity to respond to algorithmic logic plays a crucial role in crafting engagement strategies aimed at sustaining their daily economic livelihoods. The ability of street-level entrepreneurs to interpret, respond to, and strategically interact with algorithmic logic is crucial to developing engagement practices aimed at sustaining daily economic livelihoods. This study conceptualizes these practices as forms of algorithmic pragmatic rationality – a situated, experiential mode of interaction with algorithmic systems oriented toward economic survival in marginal contexts. Adopting a user-centric perspective, this study employs semi-structured interviews with 16 street-level entrepreneurs who actively create content on TikTok to promote their businesses. It aims to investigate how they perceive and engage with the platform's algorithmic system to attract consumers and increase revenue. The main findings reveal varying assumptions about TikTok's algorithm, often reduced to a simplified notion of automated content visibility governing online virality. Participants also demonstrate a strong engagement in leveraging algorithmic logic for business advantage, while highlighting the emotional costs associated with the constant engagement required to maintain high levels of visibility. Forms of algorithmic awareness, strategic repertoires, and emotional impacts are creatively integrated into hybrid economic systems. In this sense, algorithmic engagement is not merely reactive. Still, it reflects a

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survival-oriented rationality that employs TikTok as a digital tool for active and situated economic participation in the context of the bazaar economy.

Keywords: street-level entrepreneur, bazaar economy, algorithm awareness, algorithmic pragmatic rationality, TikTok, Naples.

## 1. Introduction

According to the International Telecommunication Union, it is estimated that by 2024, approximately 5.5 billion people will be connected to the Internet. In regions of the Global South, including Sub-Saharan Africa, vast areas of Asia, and Latin America, there has been a significant increase in Internet access. This expansion has facilitated the inclusion of a broad range of economic actors, fostering what has been conceptualized as a digital economy at the margins (Graham, 2019; Arora, 2019), which blends traditional practices with the affordances of the second-generation social media platforms such as TikTok (Gerbaudo, 2024). Naples represents a paradigmatic case within this broader phenomenon, given its historical presence of bazaar economy and technological appropriation rooted in a pragmatic rationality (Arvidsson et al., 2025). The ability to generate economic value and visibility without large capital investments by using the Chinese platform has been defined by Oxford Economics (2024) as the 'TikTok effect'. The term refers to the platform's potential to democratize access to economic opportunities by enabling street-level entrepreneurs to reach large audiences, promote products in real time through social commerce and engage consumers through creative and performative content (Zhang, 2023). TikTok does not simply operate as an entertainment platform but as an infrastructural tool in marginal economic contexts such as the bazaar economy. However, in contrast to platforms where visibility is primarily shaped by the social graphs or the strategic use of hashtags, TikTok relies on a recommendation system that prioritizes personalized content delivery based on user interaction patterns. This algorithm-driven design fosters intuitive and exploratory engagement, often prompting users to actively experiment with and attempt to influence the system (Taylor & Choi, 2022). Such a logic requires specific forms of cognitive effort, leading street-level entrepreneurs to form assumptions and develop creative strategies aimed at increasing the virality of their content.

In this context, algorithmic awareness is a key factor for interacting profitably with the algorithmic social media platform. In line with previous research, algorithmic awareness is understood as a multidimensional construct

(Siles et al., 2022) encompassing cognitive, behavioral, affective, and reflective dimensions (Felaco, 2022, 2024). Individuals may articulate varying assumptions about the existence and functioning of algorithms, actively engage with them to maximize benefits, or—sometimes unintentionally—remain passive recipients of algorithmic logic; they may adopt a critical stance toward algorithmic outcomes, and they often express emotional responses in reaction to them. This study introduces the concept of "algorithmic pragmatic rationality" to describe how street-level entrepreneurs engage with platform algorithms through adaptive, situated, and survival-driven strategies. Rather than relying on technical knowledge, these actors respond to algorithmic logics through trial-and-error practices shaped by their local economic conditions. This rationality is grounded in everyday pragmatism and reflects the creative use of digital tools within informal economies.

Practically, this study adopts a user-centric approach (Swart, 2021; Felaco, 2025) by employing semi-structured interviews to investigate the interactions between TikTok's algorithm and Neapolitan street-level entrepreneurs seeking to derive business-related benefits. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

*RQ1*: To what extent do street-level entrepreneurs conceive of and interact with the TikTok algorithm to express sales techniques and situated economic practices, and then benefit their businesses?

*RQ2*: How is algorithmic engagement among street-level entrepreneurs shaped by the pragmatic rationality that characterizes the bazaar economy?

This study offers a novel perspective by integrating recent scholarship on algorithm awareness with the broader literature on the bazaar economy, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the practices adopted by street-level entrepreneurs on social media platforms to generate economic opportunities.

## 2. Street-level entrepreneurs and digital baroque economy in Naples

The proliferation of digital platforms has not only enabled the participation of marginalized economic actors in the digital economy but has also led to the emergence of hybrid economic models that blend informal economic practices with new digital environments. As Arvidsson (2019) argues, this emerging digital economy operates through an industrious logic. The author distinguishes between two types of digital economy: an industrial model, which requires significant capital investments and is characterized by low labor intensity typical of Silicon Valley and an industrious model, which, by contrast, relies on high labor intensity and minimal capital investment. The digitalization of traditional economic forms occurs through a pragmatic approach that prioritizes flexibility

and the creative use of readily available resources. This economic modality is deeply embedded in local social networks and is strongly linked to everyday necessities, privileging use-value logics over purely market-driven rationales. This economy is characterized by the widespread presence of street-level entrepreneurs who effectively combine traditional skills derived from bazaar economies (Deka, 2023), the ability to navigate both formal and informal markets (Castells & Portes, 1989), and family-based labor organization as the fundamental productive unit (Zhang, 2023) with the affordances of digital platforms and second-generation social media, such as TikTok (Gerbaudo, 2024). Street-level entrepreneurs are not passive social and economic actors within the digital economy. As demonstrated by Bonini and Treré (2023), they actively develop strategies that leverage the algorithmic logics of platforms to their advantage, moving beyond mere resistance to generate economic opportunities to survive within marginalized contexts. The different strategies are rooted in a form of pragmatic rationality typical of the bazaar economy, due to its experiential character. The economic actors of these contexts trigger forms of appropriation and manipulation of technologies from below to create innovative solutions in order to transform every need into a possible business opportunity (Deka, 2023). As Gago (2017) points out, the term 'pragmatic' refers to the idea of a mass opportunism, that is, a permanent and situated calculation of potential economic possibilities through creative strategies that allow survival in marginal contexts. This pragmatic rationality is collectively enacted and consolidated in a widespread mode of economic existence.

In the Italian context, street-level entrepreneurs engaging in commercial activities (marketing and live selling) have contributed approximately one billion euros to the national GDP through the platform. This economic value is not determined by impersonal market forces but emerges through a continuous process of negotiation and adjustment that reflects the cultural and social context in which trade takes place (Geertz, 1978). The unique historical trajectory of Naples positions the city as a privileged observatory of this baroque digital economy. As a historically significant urban center, Naples has long been characterized by economic informality, entrepreneurial adaptability, and a distinct approach to technological innovation. Unlike many European industrial cities, Naples never underwent full-scale industrial transformation, meaning that its plebeian social structure was never fully integrated into a disciplined proletariat. This lack of industrial assimilation created conditions for the persistence of informal and semi-legal economies, which have continuously evolved in response to shifting economic conditions. At the same time, as Sohn-Rethel (1990) highlights, marginalized social groups in Naples have developed a unique philosophy of technological appropriation, one that radically diverges from the dominant industrial paradigms. This philosophy is rooted in practices

of reusing, repurposing, and creatively manipulating technological artefacts to serve immediate social and economic needs. The emphasis is not on technological efficiency as defined by industrial standards, but rather on adaptability, improvisation, and the ability to extract value from the breakdown of formal economic systems. The long-standing Neapolitan tradition of economic improvisation and reinvention (Pine, 2016) finds a contemporary expression in TikTok commerce, especially within the food and street fashion sectors, where street-level entrepreneurs employ theatricality, humor, and linguistic vernacular to engage audiences. Through livestream shopping, vendors establish direct communication with audiences, fostering a sense of intimacy and trust that is central to the success of digital bazaar economies. Key elements of this engagement include real-time price negotiations, personalized product recommendations, and the cultivation of community-driven brand loyalty through live streaming commerce.

The Neapolitan context, thus emerges as a paradigmatic case study in which digital commerce on TikTok develops not only as a tool for economic survival but also as a space for cultural self-representation and the construction of a localized aesthetic. The convergence of algorithmic engagement, performative sales techniques, and situated economic practices underscores the transformative potential of digital platforms as spaces of economic experimentation and social negotiation.

## 3. TikTok's algorithm awareness

TikTok presents a convincing case for exploring algorithm awareness. By positioning the algorithm as a central component of its functionality, the platform renders the "For You" function more prominent and influential than the algorithms of other social media platforms (Siles & Meléndez-Moran, 2021; Schellewald, 2023). Its recommendation system continuously adapts to user behavior – such as likes, views, replies, viewing history, and followed accounts – to refine content curation (Chen & Shi, 2022; Kang & Lou, 2022). TikTok's platform architecture deeply immerses users in automated content personalization, leading them to perceive its algorithm as highly responsive due to its rapid and tailored content adjustments based on their interactions (Taylor & Choi, 2022). This design increases user exposure to algorithmic processes, enhancing the potential for algorithm awareness.

Algorithm awareness is increasingly recognized as a meta-skill essential for making sense of and interacting with algorithms that govern digital technologies (Gran et al., 2021), including TikTok (Siles et al., 2022; Felaco, 2025). However, due to the constantly evolving, opaque, and proprietary nature of TikTok's

algorithmic system, along with the mutual modeling with user interactions, algorithm awareness remains elusive (Bucher, 2018; Hargittai et al., 2020). Therefore, algorithm awareness is dynamic and evolves over time (Siles et al., 2022).

The information that generates algorithm awareness can come from outside sources, such as media (DeVito et al., 2018) or peer conversations (Bishop, 2019). Still, inside sources, such as the frequency of use of an algorithmic platform (Powers, 2017), the breadth of use of digital platforms (Swart, 2021), and the personal interests (Klawitter & Hargittai, 2018) contribute to awareness. Nevertheless, such factors are not sufficient to equip people to fully understand algorithms. Some research has also shown that age, education, and gender are predictors of algorithm awareness (Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020; Gran et al., 2021).

All these factors contribute to the formation of stories, algorithmic imaginaries or folk theories (Bucher, 2019; DeVito et al., 2018; Schellewald, 2022), i.e. forms of representation of the functioning of algorithms that make it possible to make sense of their functioning and influence how people engage with them. Regardless of the specific algorithmic benchmarks employed, each conceptual framework underscores distinct aspects of algorithm awareness (Obreja, 2024). For example, Klug and colleagues (2021) revealed that users develop various assumptions about the workings of TikTok's algorithm. These assumptions guide their strategies to trick the algorithm or please it, to enhance their experience or to increase their content's visibility. Moreover, they show that users' assumptions and strategies significantly impact their experience on TikTok: only those who feel successful in tricking or pleasing the algorithm report higher satisfaction and engagement. Similarly, Siles and colleagues (2022) highlighted that TikTok's users with higher awareness tend to use the app more strategically, aiming to influence the algorithm to show them more desirable content, while others might reduce their usage due to frustration with the lack of transparency.

From this perspective, algorithm awareness manifests in users' tactics for resisting, adapting to, or manipulating algorithms to achieve their goals. Within the TikTok ecosystem, users develop folk theories that shape their platform identities and employ strategies to challenge the algorithm (Karizat et al., 2021). Similarly, they utilize Algospeak—strategic linguistic techniques such as euphemisms, intentional misspellings, and cultural references—to evade TikTok's automated content moderation system (Klug et al., 2021).

Users' interactions within the app are significantly shaped by their perceptions of algorithmic functioning, largely informed by their experiences on TikTok. However, recent research indicates that not all experiences contribute equally to understanding and engaging with content

recommendation and moderation algorithms. According to Felaco (2025), users generally recognize that the curation of their "For You" page is based on their prior interactions with the app, enabling them to develop effective strategies for engaging with the recommendation system. In contrast, awareness of moderation algorithms is more fragmented, often overlooking the role of algorithmic intervention in shadow-banning or censorship.

The awareness is not only based on the specific contexts in which algorithms operate (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021) but also on the type of algorithm itself. Additionally, different algorithmic systems evoke distinct emotional responses from users. In this regard, algorithm awareness can be manifested through the emotions generated by interactions with algorithms (Swart, 2021). Unforeseen or unmet algorithmic outcomes often trigger emotional reactions because they may conflict with users' expectations, which, in turn, prompt critical reflection on algorithmic systems (Kennedy & Hill, 2018; Felaco, 2024). However, these emotional responses differ between TikTok's recommendation and moderation systems (Felaco, 2025). Algorithmic decisions with substantial social implications—such as discrimination and exclusion—tend to provoke aversion, fostering a critical stance toward algorithmic decision-making. In contrast, unmet expectations regarding the recommendation algorithm typically do not lead to conflict but instead align with users' desires for escapism and entertainment, reinforcing positive sentiment toward the algorithm while discouraging critical scrutiny.

## 4. Method and procedures

This study draws upon qualitative semi-structured interviews with 16 Neapolitan street-level entrepreneurs who actively use TikTok and consistently produce content to promote their businesses. TikTok and the city of Naples present a compelling combination for examining the role of algorithm awareness among street-level entrepreneurs: Naples offers a privileged vantage point from which to observe the emerging baroque digital economy. At the same time, TikTok is specifically designed to promote user–algorithm interactions.

Participant recruitment involved a two-phase process. In the first phase, the most prominent commercial sectors on TikTok—namely, food, clothing, luxury goods, and technology—were identified. In the second phase, four street-level entrepreneurs whose videos received the highest number of views were selected from each sector.

The interviews, which averaged 50 minutes, were conducted by the authors and a student assistant between April and December 2024. Participants were

first asked to sign an informed consent form and were then invited to discuss their professional experiences, with particular attention to the use of TikTok in their work, their specific goals on the platform, their understanding of how the platform and its algorithm function, and the various strategies they employ to interact with the algorithm to gain potential advantages. Notably, the term "algorithm" was deliberately excluded from the interview protocol to avoid influencing participants' assumptions about the TikTok algorithm (see, Gruber & Hargittai, 2023).

The interviews were transcribed, anonymized, and analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2012) approach. In the initial stage, the authors independently coded the transcripts to identify salient features in the data. Subsequently, these codes were reviewed, refined, and grouped into sub-themes and overarching themes (see Table 1).

Discrepancies in interpretation and labeling were resolved through critical discussion among the coders and, when necessary, with input from an external expert. This iterative process ensured the rigor and reliability of the data analysis.

*Table 1. Coding process.*

| Codes | Sub-Themes | Themes |
|---|---|---|
| - Sales-Boosting Events: Christmas as an event that influences the content visibility system on TikTok.<br>- Sales-Boosting Events: The Napoli championship victory as an event that influences the content visibility system on TikTok.<br>- Sales-Boosting Events: Tourism as an event that influences the content visibility system on TikTok. | Algorithmic representations of the platform's external sales-boosting events, which influence the online visibility and virality of content. | Making sense of TikTok's algorithm, especially content visibility and virality systems |
| - Entrepreneurs perceive that an algorithm unilaterally determines which content deserves visibility.<br>- Algorithmic decision-making is perceived in anthropomorphic terms. | Algorithmic imaginary grounded on non-human factors: the algorithmic system determines the online visibility and virality of content. | |
| - Content deemed useful for solving practical problems goes viral more easily.<br>- Content deemed innovative goes viral more easily.<br>- Content posted regularly and continuously goes viral more easily.<br>- Content that is considered emotionally engaging goes viral more easily. | An algorithmic imaginary grounded on human factors: quality of the content and personal skills determine the online visibility and virality of content. | |
| - Boycott strategies against competitors.<br>- Recourse to external experts, content moderation system. | Tactics to tackle and bypass the content moderation system | Algorithmic tricks of the trade |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| - Strategies to circumvent content moderation systems, differentiated by social media platform.<br>- deliberate actions to improve the visibility of the content (upload videos separately on different social networks, tricks to show the phone number, etc.) | | |
| - Technical-manipulative tactics (e.g. publication time, video length, audio, etc.)<br>- Accommodation tactics (creating content that aligns with the affordances of the platform, for example, playful content; gradual introduction of new elements in the content) | Tactics to enhance content visibility and virality | |
| - Frustration when content fails to reach the levels of virality.<br>- Frustration and uncertainty arising from the opacity of content visibility and virality systems. | The visible emotional effects of the content visibility algorithm | The visible and hidden emotional (algorithmic) impacts |
| - Emotional stress and fatigue resulting from dated self-representations on TikTok within the working context to obtain algorithmic visibility (character vs real person).<br>- Emotional stress and fatigue resulting from dated self-representations on TikTok outside the working context to obtain algorithmic visibility (character vs real person). | The hidden emotional effects of the content visibility algorithm | |

## 5. Results

Respondents underscore the substantial role of TikTok in facilitating real-time product promotion and enhancing consumer outreach. For some, the platform represents a pivotal opportunity to rejuvenate their business following periods of adversity. Although they possess a general functional understanding of TikTok's operational dynamics, not all respondents explicitly acknowledge the existence of the algorithmic framework that governs the platform. Overall, the analysis revealed three main themes regarding how street-level entrepreneurs make sense of TikTok's algorithm in their digital business, specifically about the content visibility process: how they perceive the algorithm's presence and role, how they interact with it in their daily work activities, and the emotional impact of this engagement.

### *5.1 Algorithmic representations of online virality*

Respondents express varying assumptions regarding the content visibility mechanisms that underpin TikTok's virality system. Their perspectives give rise

to three distinct algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2019), each shaped by the perceived influence of internal and external factors governing the virality.

Some street-level entrepreneurs perceive virality as largely independent of deliberate interaction with the platform. Instead, they attribute visibility to external temporal dynamics—such as holidays or special occasions—that influence consumer demand: "*We post little because you have to post only at the right times. […] On TikTok, you have to follow these particular trends, and what works for us is Christmas*" (Interviewee 1 – technology).

Most respondents, by contrast, believe that content visibility is primarily influenced by the quality of the content itself, as well as the creator's ability to communicate effectively and apply creative skills. From this perspective, content must exhibit specific attributes to achieve virality and thereby enhance its potential to reach a broader audience. For some street-level entrepreneurs, this entails offering content that provides practical value to customers by addressing everyday challenges: "*When we think about which products to show on TikTok, we always ask ourselves: What problem do my customers have? Then, I think about how to solve it and offer them a useful product. […] People watch us, and we go viral because we solve their everyday problems.* (Interviewee 2 – technology). For other respondents, the core of TikTok's algorithmic recommendation system lies in the platform's capacity to establish a meaningful connection between users and content. Here, virality is primarily driven by the intrinsic quality of the content—specifically, its ability to present an innovative product or solution in line with audiences' needs. One respondent points out the importance of the impact of the communication: "*I started wondering why one video goes viral and another doesn't. People often say it's all about the algorithm, but that's not the whole story. It comes down to how strong the message is and whether it hits the audience correctly"* (Interviewee 3 - clothing). Others underscore the importance of continuous innovation while remaining true to one's brand identity: "*Trends are never stable; you can become famous and then disappear. […] To stay viral, you can't always do the same thing. You must keep up with the times but never leave your environment, your product.*" (Interviewee 4 – clothing). Regardless of the quality of content and creator's skills, some respondents assign a crucial role to the regular posting activity in keeping the virality: "*When you use TikTok, you must be constantly present. Otherwise, you won't be included in the For You section [...] For this reason, we post regularly, we try to keep a constant cadence to show the platform that we are active and present.*" (Interviewee 2 – technology).

Only a minority of respondents explicitly reflect on the algorithm's role in governing content visibility and, consequently, virality. Within this group, TikTok is often perceived as intentionally designed to enhance content virality more effectively than other social media platforms. It is described as an "open" social network—one that enables ordinary users to achieve visibility and fame,

thereby facilitating access to broader, more international markets: "*On Instagram, you have to already be someone who is known or famous. TikTok isn't like that; it's more open to everyone, and it allows everyone to go viral.*" (Interviewee 5 – food); "*The power of TikTok is the following: when you go viral, you can go viral even outside of Italy.*" (Interviewee 6 - luxury goods)

Within this perspective, a distinct algorithmic imaginary emerges in which TikTok is conceptualized as a "despotic social network"—a system in which the platform unilaterally determines which content deserves visibility. In this view, virality is not necessarily linked to content quality or strategy but rather to an algorithmically opaque system: "*In my opinion, it doesn't depend on the content […] but on TikTok, which is despotic, suddenly changing its internal rules. […] It depends on its algorithm deciding what goes viral and what doesn't*" (Interviewee 7 - food). However, viewing time is a central factor in the algorithmic mechanisms that drive virality. Here, algorithmic decision-making is often perceived in anthropomorphic terms, as if the algorithm were capable of human-like judgment: "*The TikTok algorithm works based on how much time people spend watching your video. Like, for example, if I post a video and you watch it for 5 seconds, the algorithm goes "okay." Then, suppose someone watches it for 10 seconds. In that case, it starts thinking, "Hmm, maybe this video is pretty good." And if another person watches it through—like for a full minute—then the algorithm decides to push it and maybe make it go viral. So yeah, that's why the beginning of the video is super important*" (Interviewee 6 - luxury goods). Lastly, two respondents expressed uncertainty regarding the functioning of TikTok's algorithm, highlighting their difficulty in making sense of the platform's virality mechanisms. Their accounts reflect a disconnection from the algorithmic logic that drives content visibility: "*I don't know how TikTok works... I put some hashtags and publish. I don't know why it makes me go viral*" (Interviewee 8 – food).

### *5.2 Algorithmic tricks of the trade*

Assumptions regarding the functioning of algorithms significantly shape the strategies employed by street-level entrepreneurs as they engage with TikTok to achieve virality and attract potential consumers. They report an increased understanding of the platform's algorithm function, acquired through consistent and sustained daily use (Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020).

Some interviewees adopt practical tricks to enhance the dissemination of their content. For instance, an entrepreneur employed at a homeware store explains that the publication of videos is never left to chance; rather, it is strategically scheduled during time intervals when potential customers are more likely to have free time to engage with the content: "*So we post early in the morning, at lunchtime, and in the evening [...] Basically, at times when people have more free time—*

*they're not working or studying—so I've got a better shot at them seeing my content*" (Interviewee 2 – technology). Moreover, engagement with the algorithm is closely linked to the specific features of the social media platform. Some participants report adopting distinct promotional strategies for their products depending on the platforms: "*Using Instagram, I post photos and shorter videos [...] it's a more professional platform. On TikTok, I post longer videos because the audience there is more into seeing the personal side of my life, besides the work one*" (Interviewee 7 – food).

Alongside this, street-level entrepreneurs strategically engage in "adaptive tactics", tailoring their content production to the affordances and constraints of the TikTok platform. In this context, one interviewee notes prioritizing playful content to align with the platform's structural characteristics: "*TikTok is all about fun—people want to be entertained when they watch a video, not bored with something monotonous. It wasn't made to be an ad platform but a social network for entertainment. That's why we adapt—we create funny sketches and stuff. You've got to grab their attention from the very first second"* (Interviewee 9 – technology). Likewise, one respondent creates own content in alignment with the platform's algorithmic logic, gradually introducing new elements into their videos to allow the algorithm to "adapt" over time: "*I was at home on sick leave, but I didn't want to stop posting content for my business. So, I recreated the same background I used in the shop to film my videos at home. I'm convinced that if you change too many things at once, TikTok will pick up on it and won't let your content go viral. [...] You have to make changes gradually, so the algorithm gets used to them*" (Interviewee 2 – technology).

Additional forms of engagement include tactics designed to circumvent the app's automated content moderation system. The interviewees demonstrate an understanding of how content moderation algorithms function. They recognize that being banned—or subjected to shadowbanning—can substantially decrease their content's visibility, limiting access to potential consumers. In some instances, practices akin to unfair competition are deliberately enacted in line with the operational logic of social media platforms; for example, the creation of a WhatsApp group to flag competitors' profiles as inappropriate: "*The other traders created a WhatsApp group where they've repeatedly reported my profile and my live streams*" (Interviewee 10 – technology). In response to this, counter-tactics have emerged, including the use of third-party experts who specialize in unblocking reported or banned profiles: "*We know someone who specializes in quickly reactivating TikTok profiles. We rely on him for any issues. He understands the platform's rules and lets us know how to act to avoid getting our videos banned*" (Interviewee 2 – technology). In this context, algorithm awareness does not translate into practical engagement but is confined to a cognitive stance.

Lastly, some respondents have developed personal strategies to bypass the moderation system by "gaming" it (Cotter, 2019). One in particular explains how to show your WhatsApp number while bypassing the algorithm: "*We've*

*been banned very little... I know all the rules. For example, you can't show your WhatsApp number in the videos... So I take a piece of cardboard with my number and move it around all the time; that way, the algorithm doesn't recognize it and can't ban the video*" (Interviewee 2 – technology). Similarly, a respondent describes how they repost the same video across different, competing social media platforms: "*There are tricks of the trade... for example, I also post the same video on Instagram. But you have to be careful. I've tried it: Once you've posted and saved a video on TikTok, you can't post it on Instagram because its algorithm recognizes it as a video from a competing platform. [...] So I edit the videos on TikTok, then post them separately. [...] I'm sure about it because I've tested it myself using social media*" (Interviewee 6 - luxury goods). These examples highlight the crucial role of everyday interactions with social media platforms in shaping diverse forms of engagement with algorithmic systems.

### *5.3 The visible and hidden emotional (algorithmic) impacts*

The TikTok algorithmic system offers greater fluidity in content creation, while increasing the precariousness of visibility for independent creators (Liang, 2022). For street-level entrepreneurs, the unpredictability of TikTok's algorithm triggers two types of emotional impacts.

The visible emotional effects arise when content creators engage with TikTok's algorithm. For street-level entrepreneurs, frustration emerges when their content fails to reach the levels of virality and engagement implicitly promised by the platform. This misalignment between metrics of visibility and tangible commercial outcomes often generates a heightened emotional response. *"People weren't engaging the way we had hoped, even though the numbers kept going up. Watching our follower count increase but not getting enough interaction was frustrating, because our goal is to get people to buy, not just to watch our content."* (Interviewee 2 – technology). According to Faltesek *et al.* (2023), TikTok functions as a media broadcaster than a traditional social media platform. Its algorithm prioritizes content consumption over user interaction. This algorithmic logic stands in tension with street-level entrepreneurs commercial objectives. As a result, the level of engagement with his content remains stagnant failing to drive in-store sales despite the steady growth in follower numbers. This discrepancy between visibility and conversion generates a sense of frustration. Another form of negative emotional impact emerges in relation to the ephemeral nature of algorithmic virality on TikTok. The main goal of the small-scale street entrepreneurs is to have their content appear in the platform's 'For You' section. In order to align with what they perceive as the algorithm logic, they produce and upload multiple videos per day. "*I use my phone every day, and sometimes, let's say, I really don't feel like doing TikTok because it doesn't make sense.*

*It's weird. But even when I'm really pissed off because I don't understand it and my videos don't go viral, I still have to do it, I have to be on TikTok!"* (Interviewee 1 – technology). The opacity of the mechanisms behind virality contributes to a mode of content production marked by frustration, uncertainty, and emotional exhaustion. These emotional impacts are share by several research participants: "*I sometimes post up to 15 videos a day, but I can shoot as many as 50 in one day. I sit in a corner of the shop and tune everything out, not even my wife exists in that moment* [laughs]… *People often don't understand what goes on behind the scenes. You have to think about what you want to say, how to present the product, and record it all in the shop while customers are coming in and your staff are asking you questions. I do it quickly, I record and upload many videos, but it's exhausting. I never stop, I never disconnect… It's like a vortex, and I struggle to pull myself out of it"* (Interviewee 2 – technology). This emotional burden is compounded by a broader logic of platform entrapment wherein users feel compelled to remain constantly active for fear of losing algorithmic visibility and ultimately income.

The hidden emotional effects do not stem from direct engagement with the algorithm itself, but rather from the need to manage the consequences of algorithmic outcomes beyond the platform as for the everyday management of the 'algorithmic self' (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). This form of subjectivity emerges from a reflexive engagement with previous self-representations, rather than from direct social interaction with other users. On TikTok, street-level entrepreneurs' self-presentation is shaped by constant emotional investment, self-monitoring, and recursive identity feedback mechanisms. Datafied self-representations on TikTok that aim to gain algorithmic visibility produce emotional stress and fatigue that extend beyond the platform. Street-level entrepreneurs feel compelled to perform the datafied self that users engage with on TikTok in their everyday lives: "*People come to my shop even when they don't have to buy. They just want to get to know me. Let's say they want me to be funny like in the videos, to tell them my slogan, they make videos with me. But if you're having a bad day, it's not easy. If you're nervous, you don't feel like being funny... but you have to do it anyway. People have seen a character on TikTok, and they want that. What do you do, make them go away, disappointed that what they saw on TikTok is not the same person they met in person... I can't do it, but I tell you it's stressful to always be the way I am in the videos*" (Interviewee 1 – technology). The demand for the performance of the algorithmic self by the clients of street-level entrepreneurs also unfolds in areas that do not strictly concern their economic activity. '*One day, a woman came to my shop, but I had never seen her before. She explained to me that she had a daughter in the hospital who was watching my videos. Unfortunately, she had a tumor. The daughter wanted to do a video call with me to get to know each other... so we did it. She* [daughter] *thanked me because I had entertained her with my videos since she was in the hospital. Can you imagine how I felt, the responsibility I had? But I was happy because I had helped a sick person, and*

*it was not related to my work but to how I show myself on TikTok.'* (Interviewee 1 – technology). The unpredictability of TikTok's algorithm reveals the ambivalent nature of the visible and hidden emotional impacts, ranging from a sense of frustration to a sense of entrapment to affective rewards.

## 6. Discussions and conclusion

Integrating insights from Critical Algorithm Studies (Gillespie & Seaver, 2016), Media Ideologies (Gershon, 2010), and studies on the bazaar economy (Geertz, 1978; Gago, 2017; Deka, 2023), this study examines how street-level entrepreneurs interpret and respond to TikTok's algorithm by situating their practices within the socio-economic logics of the bazaar economy. This approach provides a nuanced perspective on the situated forms of algorithm engagement developed by economically marginalized actors, thereby contributing to ongoing discussions concerning the practical interpretation, appropriation, and utilization of algorithmic infrastructures. We conceptualize this specific form of algorithmic engagement within the bazaar economy as 'algorithmic pragmatic rationality', a situated and experiential mode of interacting with algorithmic infrastructures shaped by everyday adaptability oriented toward survival in economically marginalized contexts. Consequently, the study also fills a gap in the existing literature, providing a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between algorithm awareness and pragmatic considerations inherent in the bazaar economy. The concept of algorithmic pragmatic rationality emerges from the interconnected aspects of algorithm awareness.

The central role of assumptions surrounding algorithmic virality prompts street-level entrepreneurs to develop a repertoire of strategic tactics to maximize content dissemination and circumvent the platform's automated moderation systems (Bonini & Treré, 2024). Based on the pragmatic conceptualization of how TikTok's algorithm works, street-level entrepreneurs adopt a wide range 'algorithmic tricks of the trade'. These include strategically timing video releases to align with peak user engagement, adapting promotional strategies to TikTok and Instagram's distinct algorithmic logic and affordances, and gradually introducing visual changes to allow the algorithm to adapt over time. Additionally, they develop tactics designed to circumvent the automated content moderation by employing creative solutions to avoid shadowbanning and partnering with third-party experts who specialize in unblocking flagged or banned profiles. The bricoleur attitude (Lévi-Strauss, 1966) displayed by street-level entrepreneurs in developing and applying a range of algorithmic strategies is characteristic of social actors operating within marginal economies. These

practices align with what Gago (2017) describes as 'baroque economies': heterogeneous productive forms composed as creative assemblages that bridge seemingly incompatible regimes, such as formal and informal economies, precapitalist and capitalist modes of production, and face-to-face and digital interactions. The repertoire of algorithmic strategies street-level entrepreneurs adopt is embedded within these baroque economic practices. It reflects a capacity for variation, adaptability, and survival, i.e. precarious conditions in marginalized economic contexts such as the bazaar economy.

Moreover, this study offers additional insights into the affective dimensions of algorithmic awareness. Consistent with previous research (Swart, 2021; Felaco, 2025), interactions with algorithmic systems elicit a range of emotions that contribute to the formation of entrepreneurs' awareness of algorithmic operations. In particular, the opacity of the platform and its emphasis on content virality provoke salient emotional responses, including frustration, exhaustion, and a sense of entrapment. However, this study also reveals the presence of more subtle, often concealed, emotional reactions. These emerge through the ongoing management of the 'algorithmic self,' wherein entrepreneurs experience a persistent tension between their online identities and the expectations of customers who anticipate encountering those same personas in offline interactions (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). However, algorithmic unpredictability can also lead to affective rewards and unexpected forms of symbolic recognition. These dynamics reveal that interaction with TikTok's algorithm generates emotional impacts that extend beyond the platform. Both visible and hidden emotional impacts that emerge from interaction with the algorithm highlight two fundamental features of the bazaar economy, as described by Deka (2023). On the one hand, adverse effects are conceptualized as inevitable consequences of operating through TikTok. These are framed by street-level entrepreneurs as a core dimension of the marginal conditions in which they work. These experiences are thus incorporated into regimes of justification that normalize instability and precarity as structural elements of economic participation. On the other hand, symbolic rewards are framed within the relational exchange that defines the bazaar economy, where the relationship between street-level entrepreneurs and customers does not end with the economic transaction, but is also based on mechanisms of reputation, trust, and mutual recognition. Collectively, these emotional dynamics constitute a core dimension of what we define as algorithmic pragmatic rationality, a mode of rational action shaped not solely by situated, trial-and-error engagement with algorithmic systems, but also by embodied affective investments that sustain survival-driven economic participation within marginal digital economies.

While this article has foregrounded the role of algorithmic engagement in shaping contemporary street-level entrepreneurship, we argue that such

practices should not be seen as a radical departure, but rather as a continuation of the historical dynamics that have long characterized the bazaar economy. In the context of the bazaar economy, platform governance does not wholly displace traditional logics of trade, such as relational trust, local distribution networks, or habitual customer interactions. Instead, it interlaces with them, becoming one of several forces that set the rhythm of commerce. As Gago (2017) points out, what emerges is not an algorithmically determined marketplace, but a layered assemblage of economic practices in which algorithmic pragmatic rationality operates alongside older repertoires of negotiation, improvisation, and survival.

In conclusion, the form of algorithm awareness developed by street-level entrepreneurs in the Neapolitan context cannot be reduced to a simplistic view of resistance or technological subordination. On the contrary, their algorithmic awareness, strategic repertoires, and emotional impacts are creatively assembled within hybrid economic systems shaped by a pragmatic and situated ethic typical of the bazaar economy. In this sense, algorithmic engagement is not merely reactive but constitutes a mode of active participation. It reflects a survival-oriented rationality that leverages digital tools not for personal branding or influencer-style visibility, but as a means of surviving in their daily economic activities. According to the framework proposed by Bonini and Treré (2024) on the forms of algorithmic resistance, the concept of 'algorithmic pragmatic rationality' can be framed as a 'tactical algorithmic agency aligned with the moral economy of the platform'. This strategy is considered tactical because street-level entrepreneurs possess limited economic resources and technical skills to exercise algorithmic agency. Furthermore, it aligns with the moral economy of the platform because the street-level entrepreneurs do not seek to resist the power of the TikTok. Rather, they aim to optimize their visibility and income by tactically adapting to algorithmic logics and appropriating the affordances of the platform to pursue individual economic goals.

Thus, we encourage future research to rethink algorithmic engagement within the bazaar economy as a space of pragmatic and situated rationality through which economic actors creatively assemble digital infrastructures and seemingly incompatible economic practices. However, this research has some limitations due to its qualitative nature. First, the results are based on a relatively small sample that does not allow for any generalization. Moreover, participants are selected among the most viewed TikTok creators in each sector, ensuring rich data on advanced platform use; however, it may introduce a selection bias by underrepresenting less visible actors with different engagement patterns. Second, the research focuses exclusively on the urban context of Naples. This limits the applicability of the arguments to other contexts of the bazaar economy. Third, the study only examines TikTok's algorithm, neglecting the

algorithmic dynamics of other social media platforms used by street-level entrepreneurs such as Instagram.

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