CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

SM&SI 2023 SOCIAL MEDIA & SOCIETY IN INDIA

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN, ANN ARBOR

Conference Proceedings

Social Media & Society in India

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University of Michigan

Editors
Soham De, Ashoka University
Arshia Arya, Microsoft Research
Meg Young, Data & Society
Divya Ramesh, University of Michigan
Joyojeet Pal, University of Michigan

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PREFACE

The Social Media and Society in India (SMSI) Conference was held at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, April 7–8, 2023. The event was hybrid, with over 1,000 attendees joining in-person and online.

The conference featured 25 invited speakers who were industry professionals or digital influencers, 16 peer-reviewed papers, 3 workshops that brought together scholars and practitioners and two exhibitions—one photo exhibition and one poetry exhibition.

SMSI was sponsored by the School of Information, specifically two lecture series—the John Seely Brown Technology and Society Lecture Fund and the Martha Boaz Distinguished Lectureship Fund; the Center for South Asia Studies; the Digital Studies Institute; the Center for Ethics, Society, and Computing; and the Wallace House Center for Journalists.

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A large conference is built on the work of several professionals managing the complex logistics of attending, financing, and communicating the event to the broader public. We thank Sara Vanderelzen, Robin Kocher, Stacy Callahan, Peter Keys, Colum Slevin and Dale Perry for their work on various aspects of the event.

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CHAPTER

ONE

INTRODUCTION

The dramatic increase in access to social media in the last decade in India has brought significant changes to the ways that a range of economic, cultural, and political aspects of social life are conducted. From using YouTube to plan vacations and nightly meals to using Instagram for brand management and Twitter for running political campaigns or social justice outreach, a broad range of engagements and economic activities alike are now either mediated through, or primarily driven by, social media activity.

In terms of installed base, India has the world's largest share of users on WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. It is also home to some of the most important influencers on multiple platforms—several of the most followed and monetized YouTube channels are run out of India, and the world's most followed politician is India's prime minister, Narendra Modi.

Similarly, platforms like LinkedIn, Twitter, and Snapchat all have India listed among the top five installed bases around the world. Despite the smaller revenue potential in India compared to other regions, the sheer scale of social media use in India has made it a critical location for big tech firms in this space to invest workforce and development resources.

India is unique in the role of social media in society in two important ways. First, the increase in social media access in India has been facilitated by a dramatic increase in personal digital device access and a corresponding fall in the cost of data in the last decade. This has meant that the information environment, especially for a significant number of low-income Indians, has changed precipitously in the last few years. This in turn has led to a massive expansion of political and journalistic engagement and content on social media, turning it into a primary space of news dissemination for a new generation of people moving away from print and television.

The second development relates specifically to the political environment in India, one that has seen significant polarization in the last decade. This has meant that the same issue may be presented with vastly differing valence and veracity such that people's understanding of issues can diverge dramatically depending on their social network profiles.

Twitter has become a central space for political outreach and mobilization, with several key politicians, led from the front by Prime Minister Modi himself, having moved to communicating with their constituents almost exclusively through social media and turning to social media as their primary channel for managing campaign communication during elections. Twitter is also the primary space for journalists to flag content, and despite the relatively small mindspace Twitter commands compared to WhatsApp or Facebook, the platform has come to be the channel where political and journalistic content is generated, with the other social media then becoming spaces for second-order amplification of content.

YouTube and other over-the-top (OTT) platforms including Netflix and Hotstar have likewise changed the market for television and entertainment, food, travel, and learning, and also created new spaces for live and journalistic content from citizens or independent producers. WhatsApp, besides coming to be nearly ubiquitous in its use in interpersonal communication, has become a source for political content, advertising, and commercial transaction. Instagram, particularly since the TikTok ban, has become a critical space for interpersonal short-form content, brand management, and product reviews, while LinkedIn has become a staple for college-educated Indians to navigate their professional lives. Retail services for several sectors now have no option but to invest heavily in social media in India, and a non-trivial number have moved almost exclusively to marketing online.

Social media have also allowed for remarkable forms of visibility to populations that would otherwise have no means of being at the center of broad-based attention. Several grassroots groups have found means of mobilizing support for causes with little purchase in broad-based mainstream media sources. Likewise social media have created micro-celebrities not just among elites who may otherwise have had access to traditional media spaces, but among a very new crop of individuals from rural and marginalized groups who have not only broken into popularity on social media, but have built communities and markets for their interests.

The relative newness of social media use for many Indians has implications. Many of these first-time users of social media started using online information before becoming subscribers to print publications. They also came directly to social media without the experience of recognizing scams and disingenuous infor-

mation in their feeds. This, added to the gaming of information environments by a range of actors with vested interests, has increased the potential for widespread misinformation as well as privacy concerns. Several cases of politically motivated propaganda, economic triggers, or health-care-related misinformation have surfaced in the last few years, to dramatic and sometimes violent outcomes.

As India has moved to a new political and institutional reality of right-wing hegemonic control, it has also been a site of contention between technology companies and the government over cases of censorship and collusion. This also means that social media are a critical point of contestation that amplify the influence of institutions of power but also give voice to challenges to these structures' access to this public sphere.

At the Social Media and Society Conference at the University of Michigan in April 2023, we curated a carefully selected set of invited speakers and research papers that cover these various aspects of technology and society in India.

Figure 1.0.1: Vikas Divyakirti speaks at SMSI 2023 (Courtesy: UMSI Twitter)

Part I

Talks

CHAPTER

TWO

PANEL 1: INSTITUTIONS

2.1 Karuna Nundy: The virality of rights

Talk Summary: Karuna Nundy delivered a talk discussing online virality, law, and the impact of social media. She highlighted a Supreme Court case in India on free speech, where a law criminalizing annoying or inconvenient talk was struck down. Nundy's viral tweets influenced the conversation and the drafting of anti-rape laws. She explored the historical origins of rape laws and their influence on jurisprudence. Nundy expressed concerns about constructed virality and the spread of disinformation, particularly by men's rights associations. She questioned how to counter harmful virality and polarization on social media, and whether progressive values should also go viral. Nundy discussed the involvement of men's rights associations in the marital rape conversation and their evolving influence. She emphasized the need to address misinformation and the virality of oppression, calling for collaboration across domains to effectively tackle these challenges.

Karuna Nundy on Twitter

Link to Karuna's SMSI talk on YouTube

2.2 Meena Kotwal: Why diversity is important in media and is social media journalism effective at raising ground-level issues?

Talk Summary: In her talk on the importance of diversity in media and the effectiveness of social media journalism in raising ground-level issues, Meena Kotwal, founder of the media venture Mooknayak, highlighted the lack of diversity in Indian media. Despite celebrating many milestones, Indian media remain far from inclusive even after 75 years. Research conducted by Anil Chamaria in 2006 revealed the under-representation of marginalized communities in senior positions across digital, print, radio, and television media. The absence of diversity at the decision-making level raises questions about the filtering mechanisms that hinder the progress of underrepresented individuals. Oxfam's research in 2019 further emphasized the scarcity of Dalit and Adivasi editors in Indian news media. The situation is mirrored globally, as demonstrated by a 2020 report indicating a predominance of white journalists in the United Kingdom. Kotwal's media venture, Mooknayak, endeavors to address these disparities. With a diverse team comprising individuals from various caste, religious, and marginalized backgrounds, Mooknayak focuses on bringing attention to often overlooked stories. Through social media platforms, they have shed light on issues such as lack of documentation, citizenship, education, and basic amenities faced by marginalized communities. The team's reporting has prompted positive changes, such as the provision of documents and improved services. Kotwal emphasizes the power of social media in amplifying voices and raising awareness. While some progress has been made, Kotwal acknowledges that true equality and representation are still lacking. Caste-based discrimination persists within media organizations, hindering opportunities for talented individuals from marginalized communities. Mooknayak strives to challenge this bias and provide a platform for underrepresented voices. The appreciation and support the team receives from those they represent further motivate their work. In conclusion, Kotwal's talk highlighted the urgent need for diversity in media and the effectiveness of social media journalism in highlighting ground-level issues. Through Mooknayak, she aimed to counter the prevailing biases and empower marginalized communities through storytelling and advocacy.

Meena Kotwal on Twitter

Link to Meena's SMSI talk on YouTube

2.3 Saurabh Dwivedi: My learning from political reporting across India

Talk Summary: In this talk, the speaker, an editor and political reporter from India, shared his experiences and insights on various aspects of Indian democracy. He highlighted 12 incidents to illustrate different challenges and perspectives. He recounted an incident in Bihar where he attended a death dinner and had a conversation with a self-proclaimed doctor who provided medical treatments without formal training. This encounter exposes flaws in India's health care system. Dwivedi also discussed the issue of population control and the need for incentivizing family planning. He then talked about conversations with lawyers who suggested voting for a particular party based on profession or community affiliation, overlooking important historical facts. He also encountered political workers who believed that not everyone should have the right to vote, as well as villagers who attended political rallies for personal gains rather than political awareness. Dwivedi highlighted the views of a 13-year-old boy who supports a politician based on her contributions to building parks, providing a sense of belonging. He also discussed the lack of gender sensibility among children and the influence of teachers in shaping their perspectives. Additionally, Dwivedi engaged with young people preparing for army exams who expressed frustration with the government but still prioritized their caste identity and nationalism. He met girls who had to halt their education due to inadequate infrastructure and transportation, but who aspired to become entrepreneurs. Overall, Dwivedi presented a nuanced view of India's layered democracy, highlighting the diverse challenges and aspirations within the country.

Saurabh Dwivedi on Twitter

Link to Saurabh's SMSI talk on YouTube

2.4 Dr. Medusa: Navigating the corridors of power while writing satire on social media

Talk Summary: Dr. Medusa started by sharing poetry by Puneet Sharma, which effectively addressed her relationship with her homeland and strong connection to her country, as well as her father's influence on her perception of this. She shared how the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic opened her eyes to social injustices and privilege, prompting her to use satire and language to comment on political events and policies. Dr. Medusa described her video series, including one on coordinating conjunctions and another mimicking news delivery in a satirical manner. She emphasized the importance of language in shaping opinions and criticized the mainstream media's manipulation of information. She concluded by introducing her final series, the "Entity-C Help Line," where she humorously portrays herself as the creator of troll scripts to highlight their repetitive and derogatory behavior. She acknowledged the personal and selfish motivation behind her work but expressed gratitude for the support she has received.

Dr. Medusa on Twitter

Link to Dr. Medusa's SMSI talk on YouTube

CHAPTER

THREE

PANEL 2: NEW RESISTANCES

3.1 Sushant Divgikr: Using social media to build equality and equity

Talk Summary: Sushant, who also goes by Rani Kohenur discussed the impact of social media, particularly platforms like Instagram and YouTube, in promoting democratic expression and breaking down barriers based on gender, caste, or other characteristics. They highlighted how social media have helped them understand their own transgender identity and the rich culture of transgender people in India. They emphasized the importance of creating content authentically and without fear of judgment, while acknowledging the potential for both positive and negative consumption of content. Divgikr reflected on the portrayal of transgender individuals in mainstream media as caricatures and the struggle for acceptance and equal rights in society. They shared their personal journey of coming out as transgender and the challenges they faced within and outside the LGBTQIA+ community. Divgikr emphasized the need to unlearn and reevaluate societal norms and perceptions surrounding gender. Through their content and art, they aim to empower marginalized communities and create a more equitable society.

The speaker discussed the privileges they have as a trans person in India, such as supportive parents and access to education, while acknowledging the less fortunate circumstances of other trans individuals. They expressed the desire for an equal playing ground and recognition as equal citizens without needing special rights. The speaker also mentioned the positive impact of social media activism and the importance of educating audiences about different aspects of the LGBTQIA+ community. They expressed hope for a brighter future, driven by the empathy and education of a new generation of creators and a greater reach

of content to policymakers. Divgikr concluded by emphasizing their dedication to advocating for marginalized communities and their belief in a more inclusive and accepting society.

Sushant Divgikr on Instagram

Link to Sushant's SMSI talk on YouTube

3.2 ROFL Gandhi: Freedom after talk: Social media experiences & stories

Talk Summary: Satirist ROFL Gandhi shared personal experiences and insights gained during their 13-year journey on social media, particularly on Twitter. The talk shed light on the evolving nature of online platforms, the consequences of digital expression, and the blurring lines between satire and reality. The speaker began by reflecting on their initial foray into Twitter, driven by the desire to ridicule powerful figures like Parliament member Rahul Gandhi. They reminisced about a time when online satire had minimal repercussions, contrasting it with the transformed landscape post-2014. With the advent of accessible Internet and the rise of organized Internet trolls, individuals began facing consequences for their tweets and Facebook posts. The speaker shared a harrowing personal incident that occurred during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. A tweet questioning the government's response to the mass migration of people sparked an unexpected midnight raid by the police. The speaker described the bewildering experience of being questioned, having their phone confiscated, and witnessing the arbitrary nature of legal proceedings. Highlighting the power dynamics at play, the speaker humorously juxtaposed their interrogation with the plight of migrants waiting for transportation at the border. The speaker emphasized the normalization of being targeted for online expression, citing examples of others facing similar fates, including a case where an individual was arrested years after posting a simple movie screenshot. Additionally, the speaker humorously noted instances where their satirical tweets became eerily reflective of real-life statements made by government officials, blurring the lines between parody and reality. Concluding the talk, the speaker warned about the illusion of privacy and anonymity online, emphasizing that if the government wants to target someone, it can easily do so. The audience was advised to exercise caution and be mindful of the risks associated with digital expression.

ROFL Gandhi on Twitter

Link to ROFL Gandhi's SMSI talk on YouTube

3.3 Jacinta Kerketta: Social media and the journey of poems of resistance

Talk Summary: The speaker, a poet and activist, started by sharing a poem (transcribed to English), in part: "They are waiting for us to become civilized, We are waiting for them to turn human." The speaker continued to share personal anecdotes of violence and vilification that she and her Adivasi community were subjected to. She shared that one day in Jharkhand, 10–20 people came and started beating her family members without reason. There was a mob lynching, for revenge, and this incident made her realize that no one from the Adivasi community had a voice in the media. At that time, she was writing poems and stories for children. She wanted to study writing, and at times she had to ask for money on the road to do so. She started writing about the experiences of people in her village, but she had no idea how to get it published. That is when she joined Facebook and started posting her work and receiving promising feedback and her work started going viral. She travelled the state of Jharkhand extensively, and has gained recognition internationally for her poetry, including being invited to speak of her work in Germany, but got no media coverage within India. She elaborated how she and all Adivasis have experienced the impact of caste oppression and the condescending perspectives toward them in all pursuits, even when people from the community make a name for themselves. She noticed that even people in remote localities and other indigenous communities engaged with her poetry. Within her city, tailors, shopkeepers, and others recognized her work and felt represented by it, and this could only be possible through social media. She concluded her talk with the poem (excerpted):

"*Those selling out their integrity for a few pieces of silver, How would they ever comprehend why some people lay down their lives for the sake of the hills?*"

Jacinta Kerketta on Twitter

Link to Jacinta's SMSI talk on YouTube

3.4 Arfa Khanum Sherwani: Social media and mass movements in India. How are India's most marginalized using social media?

Talk Summary: This talk explored the role of social media in India's mass movements and how marginalized communities in the country utilize online platforms to empower themselves. Arfa Khanum Sherwani, a journalist, shed light on the significance of social media as a tool for marginalized populations to voice their concerns, garner support, and challenge the existing societal norms. With India having more than 560 million Internet users and an increase in smartphone usage, social media platforms have emerged as a powerful force in the country. Its influence in shaping narratives and mobilizing citizens has been increasingly evident in recent years. The talk focused on specific instances where social media have played a pivotal role in catalyzing mass movements and amplifying the voices of those marginalized in society. From Dalits and Adivasis to women and LGBTQ+ individuals, social media platforms have provided a space for marginalized groups to share stories of oppression, discrimination, and injustice. These narratives have sparked public outrage and led to offline protests, policy changes, and societal transformations. Social media have enabled marginalized communities to gather support, build solidarity, and raise awareness about their lived experiences. The journalist shared many personal experiences of polarized offline attacks while on the job and also recounted cases if gory attacks on minority groups. She emphasized the need for a nuanced understanding of social media's complexities and the importance of digital literacy to create a safe and inclusive online space for all. By examining the intersection of social media, mass movements, and marginalized communities, she aims to inspire dialogue, reflection, and action for a more equitable and inclusive India.

Arfa Khanum on Twitter

Link to Arfa's SMSI talk on YouTube

CHAPTER

FOUR

PANEL 3: ADVOCACY

4.1 Apar Gupta: Access without advocacy

Talk Summary: In this talk, Apar Gupta addressed the regulation of the Internet in relation to pre-expression, focusing on the context of India. With a belief in the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression, which encompasses the right to receive and disseminate information, the speaker highlighted the importance of free expression in the digital age. However, recent developments and reports indicate growing restrictions on Internet freedom in India. Gupta discussed the Information Technology Intermediaries Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code Amendment Rules of 2023, which introduced a new censorship mechanism. This amendment empowers the government to authorize a fact-check unit to identify and remove content deemed by the central government to be fake, false, or misleading. Such control over information raises concerns about the government's authority to determine what is acceptable online expression. Furthermore, the talk delved into the digital divide in India, with significant disparities in broadband access between rural and urban areas. This divide, along with Internet shutdowns, undermines the promise of Internet access for essential services like telemedicine and remote education. The speaker also highlighted the lack of transparency and accountability surrounding website blocking and content moderation. The information technology (IT) rules, initially intended to protect service providers from liability, have evolved into burdensome regulations affecting encryption, user privacy, and news media platforms. Overall, Gupta emphasized the need to safeguard free expression online while addressing the challenges and implications of Internet regulation in India.

Apar Gupta on Twitter

Link to Apar's SMSI talk on YouTube

4.2 Bezwada Wilson: Manual scavenging–social media

Talk Summary: In this thought-provoking talk, the speaker delved into the complex relationship among social media, mainstream media, and justice in a democratic society. While initially skeptical of social media's significance, Wilson recognized its undeniable impact on shaping societal narratives. Highlighting the monopolization of mainstream media by governments and corporations, the speaker emphasized the need for alternative media platforms to ensure a diverse range of voices and perspectives.

Wilson underscored the biases inherent in traditional media, where breaking news and headlines often overlook news that challenges the status quo. The speaker drew attention to the tendency to sensationalize tragic events, particularly when they involve the marginalized Dalit communities of India. The speaker condemned the media's focus on the sensational rather than the systemic issues, perpetuating stereotypes and disregarding the dignity and courage of those fighting for equality. Furthermore, the speaker questioned the government's role in controlling public opinion and suppressing dissent. Wilson highlighted the dangerous erosion of democracy when power manipulates information and silences voices seeking justice. The speaker critiqued the lack of media coverage surrounding the hazardous and inhumane practice of manual scavenging, where countless lives are lost each year. The denial of these deaths and the lack of accountability in government institutions are deeply troubling. Ultimately, Wilson argued that justice is the cornerstone of democracy. Without addressing the systemic injustices faced by marginalized communities and amplifying their voices, democracy cannot truly exist. The talk challenged the audience to recognize the vital role of media, both traditional and social, in shaping narratives, promoting justice, and ensuring an inclusive democracy.

Bezwada Wilson on Twitter

Link to Bezwada's SMSI talk on YouTube

4.3 Vikas Divyakirti: How social media changed my life

Talk Summary: In this talk, Divyakirti shared personal experiences with social media and how these platforms changed their life. The speaker initially joined social media platforms like Orkut and Facebook upon the insistence of friends, gradually gaining a large following. However, they later realized that the connections on social media were superficial and lacked genuine support. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the speaker's recorded lectures gained popularity on YouTube, unintentionally making them a well-known figure. This unexpected fame led to both positive and negative consequences, such as generating employment opportunities but also the unauthorized use of their content by other channels. The speaker highlighted the power of social media to influence and shape narratives, democratizing the ability to create content and have an impact. They emphasized the potential for anyone, regardless of background or literacy, to become a content creator and inspire others. Divyakirti expressed optimism about the positive contributions that can be made through social media. They started their own YouTube channel to share philosophical and educational content, aiming to foster scientific thinking and objectivity among their audience.

Vikas Divyakirti's channel on YouTube

Link to Vikas' SMSI talk on YouTube

CHAPTER

FIVE

PANEL 4: INTERNATIONALIZATION

5.1 Rega Jha: The limits of a Western-made web culture: Lessons from importing BuzzFeed to India

Talk Summary: The speaker, Rega Jha, shared her insights and experiences from her time building and running BuzzFeed in India. She discussed the challenges and successes she encountered during her 5 years at BuzzFeed. She highlighted the need for cultural awareness and understanding when expanding a global media company in a diverse country like India. Jha described the early days of BuzzFeed in India, where she aimed to create content that resonated with the Indian audience. She faced criticism from both the right wing and the left wing but also received valuable feedback from individuals who challenged her feminist perspectives. These interactions made her realize the importance of understanding the sociological realities of India and the limitations of relying on individuals with privilege to represent the country accurately. She emphasized the double standards that exist in American media companies operating in India and pointed out the need for self-reflection and awareness of cultural nuances. Jha also acknowledged the positive aspects of working with a global organization, such as the ability to publish progressive content and engage with important social issues. In conclusion, Jha acknowledged the lack of a clear resolution to the challenges she faced. However, she recognized the benefits and drawbacks of operating under a Western business model in India. She encouraged a deeper understanding of Indian culture and the impact media can have on society. Overall, her talk provided valuable insights into the complexities of running a global media company in a diverse and culturally rich country like India.

Rega Jha on Twitter
Link to Rega's talk

5.2 Shobha Kapoor: Children's social media content in India

Talk Summary: Shobha Kapoor, the director of media and communications at Sesame Workshop in India, gave a talk about the organization's strategies and efforts to reach, engage, and impact children and families in India. Sesame Workshop is a global not-for-profit organization that has been operating for over 53 years in more than 150 countries, aiming to help children grow smarter, stronger, and kinder. In India, Sesame Workshop operates under the name "Kali Gali Simpson" and works with low-resource communities as well as children from all backgrounds. It employs various platforms such as television, radio, streaming video, digital games, publishing, and more to engage children and families. Sesame Workshop focuses on two pillars of impact: transforming learning at scale and building resilient children and families. Sesame Workshop aims to address the learning gap in foundational literacy and numeracy and to promote mental well-being. Sesame Workshop India collaborates with state governments and implements programs in anganwadis (government-run preschool centers) to reach and deliver content to children. It emphasizes the use of the child's mother tongue for better engagement. The organization has also developed programs focused on environmental stewardship, mental well-being, father–child relationships, and positive hygiene and behavior changes. Sesame Workshop India has seen significant success with over 174 million views and 1.3 million subscribers on its YouTube channels. It actively engages with audiences on social media and runs campaigns to spread awareness and promote positive behaviors. The organization recognizes the importance of consistency and relevance in social media engagement and continues to adapt its strategies to reach the masses and address relevant topics. Overall, Shobha Kapoor's talk highlighted the impactful work of Sesame Workshop in India and its commitment to empowering children and families through various media platforms and community partnerships.

Sesame Workshop on Twitter

Link to Shobha's SMSI talk on YouTube

5.3 Ravi Iyer: Platform design as a lever to address misinformation and hate across contexts

Talk Summary: In this talk, Ravi Iyer, the managing director of the Psychology of Technology Institute, shared his insights on platform design as a solution to addressing misinformation and hate speech in various contexts, particularly focusing on India. He emphasized the importance of diverse perspectives and the impact of technology on society. Iyer discussed his background in data science and working with Facebook to improve the societal impact of social media. He highlighted the limitations of content enforcement policies and the need to consider factors such as fear speech and intergroup anxiety. Iyer suggested that design changes can be more effective in addressing these issues and shared specific examples of successful design modifications, such as removing engagement incentives and reforming algorithms. He advocated for incorporating user feedback, negative feedback mechanisms, and functionality limitations to create safer online spaces. Iyer concluded with three policy recommendations: regulating design instead of speech, focusing on user experience, and implementing effective limitations on platform functionality. Overall, his speech highlighted the importance of platform design in combating misinformation and hate speech while promoting a healthier online environment.

Ravi Iyer on Twitter

Link to Ravi's SMSI talk on YouTube

5.4 Monojit Choudhury: We might praise you in English, gaali to Hindi me hi denge!

Talk Summary: Monojit Choudhury, principal applied scientist at Microsoft Turing, delivered a talk discussing various aspects of natural language processing (NLP) and cognitive sciences. He highlighted his interest in NLP for low-resource and endangered languages, language use in social media, ethics of NLP, and artificial intelligence (AI). Choudhury emphasized the importance of linguistic diversity and heritage, particularly in India and the Asia Pacific region, where he actively drives the linguistic Olympiad for high school students. Choudhury discussed his research on code mixing, or code switching, where languages are mixed together, and how this phenomenon occurs across the world, not just in India. He described how his team faced challenges in convincing others of the significance of studying code mixing until the release of products like Alexa and Skype Translator, which showed the practical need for understanding mixed languages.

Choudhury presented two studies conducted on social media data. The first study examined the reasons behind code switching, revealing patterns such as emphasis, emotion, and topic preferences. He also discussed gender differences in code switching, highlighting that women tend to swear less and predominantly use English for swearing. The second study analyzed code switching in seven European languages on social media and found variations in code mixing across different geographies. English-dominant countries had lower instances of code switching, indicating a phenomenon of acculturation and the aspiration to project a homogeneous identity. Choudhury emphasized the importance of studying code mixing on social media because it provides a large-scale platform for linguistic research, but he cautioned that social media might not fully represent real-world language usage. In the concluding part of his talk, Choudhury discussed the challenges faced by the vast majority of languages that lack technological resources. He highlighted the urgency of preserving endangered languages and the potential extinction of many languages by the turn of the century. He emphasized the need for technological development to address this issue and prevent the loss of linguistic diversity.

Monojit Choudhury on Twitter

Link to Monojit's SMSI talk on YouTube

CHAPTER

SIX

PANEL 5: HEALTH & WELL-BEING

6.1 Nikhil Taneja: The loneliness of India's Gen Z

Talk Summary: The speaker, Nikhil Taneja, shared his experiences and insights as the co-founder and chief executive officer of Yuva, a youth media organization in India. He began by recounting a story of a young boy who found acceptance and support through storytelling on the Yuva platform. This story highlights the impact of social media and the power of creating safe spaces for individuals to express themselves. Taneja discussed the importance of understanding and empowering the youth in India, considering that the country has the largest youth workforce in the world. He acknowledged the generational differences between Millennials and Generation Z (Gen Z) and how the Internet and social media have shaped the latter. He emphasized the need to bridge the communication gap between Gen Z and their parents, given that the younger generation has access to vast amounts of information and identities through technology. The speaker also explored the pressures faced by Gen Z, including the constant comparisons on platforms like Instagram, where everyone seems to be achieving greatness. He noted the pressure to project constant happiness and how authentic stories of struggle or failure are often overshadowed by the pursuit of likes and monetization. Taneja concluded by highlighting the importance of empathy, understanding, and creating spaces for young people to share their stories. He shared his learning from Yuva's roadshow, where he engaged with thousands of young individuals across India, and emphasized the humanity behind statistics and research studies. Overall, the talk emphasized the transformative power of storytelling and the need for empathy and understanding in empowering and supporting the youth in India.

Nikhil Taneja on Twitter and Instagram

Link to Nikhil's SMSI talk on YouTube

6.2 Tanaya Narendra (Dr. Cuterus): Making healthy sexy: Redefining sexual health on social media

Talk Summary: This talk was about the lack of comprehensive and culturally relevant sex education and body literacy, both in India and globally. The speaker highlighted the need for nuanced and inclusive education that addresses specific concerns and challenges faced by different communities. They emphasized the importance of normalizing conversations about our bodies and combating the shame and stigma associated with discussing topics like reproductive health. The speaker shared anecdotes, including a story of a couple who struggled to conceive because of a misguided belief about reproduction, and the prevalence of misinformation spread through platforms like WhatsApp. They criticized the Westernization of sex education in India and the appropriation of cultural practices for profit. The talk also touched on the power of social media in transforming the discourse around health and body awareness. The speaker praised the impact of online platforms in fostering community building, sharing experiences, and providing accessible information. They mentioned the significance of doctor influencers who bridge the gap between patients and medical professionals, promoting dialogue and trust. Furthermore, the speaker highlighted the importance of initiatives like human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination and the role of social media in disseminating vital health information. They recounted a personal story where their content prompted someone to get vaccinated, leading to the early detection of cervical cancer. In conclusion, Narendra advocated for organized and democratized information sharing and called for more action and collaboration from creators and scientists to create meaningful medical content. They expressed optimism about the positive impact of social media in improving health literacy and promoting discussions about our bodies.

Dr. Cuterus on Instagram

Link to Dr. Cuterus' SMSI talk on YouTube

6.3 Cyriac Abby Phillips (The Liver Doc): A hill to die on: Battling health misinformation and harassment—Ayush system, public health, and social media in India

Talk Summary: Dr. Cyriac Abby Phillips, known as the Liver Doc on Twitter, is a clinician scientist and liver disease specialist. In his talk, he discussed his work in hepatology (the study of liver diseases) and his focus on severe alcoholic liver disease and drug-induced liver injury within the context of Indian traditional medicine. Dr. Phillips utilizes social media to promote evidence-based medicine and improve scientific understanding in health care decision-making. He shared his experiences with science communication, particularly in relation to alternative medicine, and the challenges he faces, including accusations of being influenced by pharmaceutical companies. Dr. Phillips highlighted the problem of health misinformation and its consequences. He presented research showing that herbal and homeopathic medications can cause liver injury, leading to high mortality rates. He emphasized the need to combat misinformation and shared examples of patients who suffered from liver disease caused by alternative medicines. He also exposed the questionable ingredients found in some Ayurvedic and homeopathic medicines, such as elephant dung, animal semen, and cockroach extracts. Dr. Phillips emphasized the importance of evidence-based medicine and the dangers of misinformation spread by the alternative medicine industry. Despite facing criticism and abuse on social media, Dr. Phillips continues to advocate for the dissemination of accurate information and the protection of public health.

The LiverDoc on Twitter

Link to the LiverDoc's SMSI talk on YouTube

6.4 Harnidh Kaur: Confessions of a semi-retired influencer: How irrelevance saved my life

Talk Summary: Harnidh Kaur, a startup operator, poet, and author, discussed the impact of social media on mental health and the challenges faced by influencers. She shifted the focus from how social media affect consumers to how these platforms affect creators. Influencers may have an audience, but their relevance and influence are often short-lived, leading them to conform to their audience's expectations. Kaur explored the economics of the creator economy, particularly in India, highlighting the challenges of monetization and the saturation of influencers. She emphasized the exhaustion and burnout experienced by creators in the fast-paced world of social media. Ad and brand monetization offer diminishing returns because of privacy regulations and algorithmic changes. Kaur advised influencers to develop hard skills beyond their influencer status, understand the economics of their field, and have an exit plan in place. She urged influencers to distance themselves from the validation they receive online because audiences are not always loyal and influencers' misery can become entertainment for others. Kaur encouraged influencers to find joy in irrelevance, embrace new experiences, and recognize their worth as individuals, not just as brands or billboards. Kaur's talk shed light on the mental health impacts of social media and the challenges faced by influencers in the creator economy. She offered advice to influencers, urging them to develop skills beyond their online presence, understand the economics of their field, and find peace and self-worth beyond the pressures of social media validation.

Harnidh Kaur on Instagram

Link to Harnidh's SMSI talk on YouTube

CHAPTER

SEVEN

PANEL 6: NAVIGATING ALGORITHMS

7.1 Sayema Rahman (RJ Sayema): Social media in India—A haven for hate

Talk Summary: The speaker began by sharing their experience as a heavily trolled influencer on social media, particularly due to their religious identity as a Muslim in a politically charged and patriarchal atmosphere. They highlighted the prevalence of hate speech on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp, which have become havens for hate, especially in India. Rahman discussed the popularity of social media in India, with statistics showing the widespread usage of platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook. The speaker recounted their personal encounters with hate speech and online abuse, particularly when they shared stories written by Saadat Hasan Manto, challenging stereotypes and addressing societal issues. The targeting intensified when they voiced their opposition to the Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens proposed by the Indian government. They discussed the impact of social media hate, which goes beyond online interactions and reaches people's homes, leading to violence, economic boycotts, and harassment. Rahman emphasized that hate speech on social media has been linked to increased violence against minorities globally. They criticized the communal and divisive politics in India and highlighted the business model of social media platforms that thrive on attracting attention, including unpleasant speech. The speaker shared experiences of being threatened and targeted as a Muslim woman and highlighted the lack of action against offenders. They criticized social media platforms for allowing hate speech and false news to proliferate without consequences. Rahman also mentioned the Supreme Court of India's concerns about unregulated hate speech on television

and social media. Despite the challenges, the speaker remains hopeful and advocates for love, respect, coexistence, and fighting hatred with secularism and truth. They called for social media platforms like Meta (formerly Facebook), Twitter, and Google to stop enabling divisive political agendas and violent actors. Rahman ended with a message of hope and resilience, emphasizing the importance of fighting hate and injustice with love and truth.

Sayema Rahman on Twitter

Link to Sayema's SMSI talk on YouTube

7.2 Kaneez Surka: Authenticity and the algorithm

Talk Summary: Kaneez Sarka, a comedian and improvisation (improv) artist, shared her journey in the world of improv and comedy in this talk. She explored the challenge of maintaining authenticity on social media amid changing trends, political climates, and evolving business models. Surka humorously suggested that the solution to staying authentic is through posting bikini pictures and dance reels. She highlighted the early days of comedy in India, which coincided with the rise of social media platforms. Unlike comedians in other countries, Indian comedians quickly gained popularity by creating viral videos on social media, allowing them to tap into their online audience to grow their live shows. Surka reflected on the freedom and experimentation comedians had in the beginning, being their authentic selves without worrying about algorithms or content restrictions. As their numbers grew, brands approached them, leading to monetization opportunities and business models built around their influence. However, Surka acknowledged the pressure and challenges that come with popularity and algorithmic restrictions. Despite these challenges, Surka emphasized the importance of staying true to oneself and not letting algorithms or trends dictate one's authenticity and worth as an artist. She concluded by reiterating the significance of live performances as the platform where she feels most free and authentic, reminding fellow comedians not to get caught up in the trap of social media's demands.

Kaneez Surka on Twitter

Link to Kaneez's SMSI talk on YouTube

7.3 Abhinandan Sekhri: When journalism is compromised and social media drive metrics

Talk Summary: The speaker, Abhinandan Sekhri, emphasized the importance of educating oneself, particularly on feminism, for men of his age. He mentioned interesting data points, such as Kerala having the highest per capita alcohol consumption. Sekhri then delved into the impact of social media on news, society, and politics. He quoted a friend who stated that if one doesn't find politics, politics will find them. He discussed how certain events "break the Internet," citing examples like a serial killer and viral celebrity stories. He said he believes that social media have a net positive impact but acknowledges that its full potential is yet to be realized. He observed that news and information have become more popular than entertainment, with the Internet competing for attention on the same devices. Previously, entertainment and news were consumed separately. However, the Internet has allowed individuals like Sekhri to start ventures without traditional support. Sekhri discussed the diminishing role of editorial filters in determining news and the rise of social media algorithms and trends. He mentioned how news platforms compete for eyeballs, leading to a mix of important news and sensational content. He believes that social media have broken the authority of editors and allowed the mob to dictate trends. The speaker highlighted the importance of news in defending society against authoritarianism and assaults on liberal values. He lamented the impact of algorithms on news and expressed concern about the destruction of news in profound ways. Sekhri shared his story and mentioned the inspiration he draws from a quote by George Mallory, a mountaineer. The quote emphasizes the desire to take on challenges simply because they exist. Sekhri concluded that one must engage in journalism and fight for what is right because it is the calling to do so.

Abhinandan Sekhri on Twitter

Link to Abhinandan's talk on YouTube

7.4 Mohak Mangal: The mystery of YouTube influencers

Talk Summary: The speaker, Mohak Mangal, also known as the Soch Guy, runs a fact-based YouTube channel and discussed his tribe and their unique appeal. He acknowledged feeling imposter syndrome compared to other speakers who take more risks. Despite this, he aimed to share his valuable perspective. Mangal highlighted the popularity of lesser-known YouTubers like Nitish Rajput, who receives significantly more views than established figures like Shekhar Gupta. Mangal explored why people watch influencers like him and presented four reasons: stories, aspiration, understanding the audience, and an obsession with metrics. Mangal emphasized the power of storytelling in engaging audiences, stating that news should be entertaining. He believes that even complex topics can be made appealing if packaged correctly, citing an example of a video about thermal power plants garnering 40 million views. While acknowledging concerns about fake news, he argued that storytelling is necessary to counter it effectively. He encouraged traditional media to shift toward storytelling rather than solely providing information. Looking to the future, Mangal envisions the rise of virtual influencers generated through AI. He suggested that storytelling will remain crucial, with virtual influencers adapting their language to specific regions to connect with audiences. Mangal concluded by emphasizing that becoming a better storyteller is the key to success in gaining and retaining audiences. Overall, Mangal's talk centered on the importance of storytelling, the appeal of lesser-known influencers, and the future role of AI-generated virtual influencers in capturing audience attention.

Mohak Mangal's channel on YouTube

Link to Mohak's SMSI talk on YouTube

7.5 Vishal Muttemwar: Building a social media organization for a political party

Talk Summary: Vishal Muttemwar, the representative of the Congress Party in Maharashtra, shared the party's journey in rebuilding its social media presence since its defeat in the 2014 elections. He highlighted the importance of social media platforms in today's political landscape and described the organizational structure they have established to effectively disseminate information and respond to daily discussions. Muttemwar emphasized the role of social media 'warriors' within the party's team, who may lack public speaking skills but find empowerment and purpose online. He discussed the challenges the party faces, including a ruling party that aims to eliminate opposition through narrative management, division, and distraction. The misuse of institutions, rigging of electoral mandates, and subversion of parliamentary procedures are some of the concerns raised. Muttemwar also mentioned the spread of hatred toward minorities and favoritism toward specific industrial houses. He concluded by emphasizing the importance of allowing public discourse and diverse voices in order to avoid a society controlled by a single ideology.

Vishal Muttemwar on Twitter

Link to Vishal's SMSI talk on YouTube

CHAPTER

EIGHT

FIRESIDE CHAT

8.1 Richa Chadha in conversation with Kuhu Tanvir

Summary: In a broad conversation with students, faculty, and attendees, actor Richa Chadha discuss what it means for an actor to be online, how social media has evolved online over the last decade for entertainers in India, how what one says on social media impacts their professional prospects online. She commented on how her political views have shaped the kinds of work she gets, or accepts, as well as how the state of the free press and judiciary impact what one is able to say or do online. She also discussed how the economics of theatre watching as well the pandemic impacted viewing culture in India.

Richa Chadha on Instagram

Link to the SMSI fireside chat on YouTube

Part II

Workshops

CHAPTER

NINE

LOCALIZED GOVERNANCE OF PLATFORMS

The first platform design roundtable, called Localized Governance of Platforms, discussed interventions that would support more local self-determination in platform governance such as changes by tech platforms or regulators. The panel of experts included Ravi Iyer, Joan Donovan, Apar Gupta, Nikhil Taneja, Kiran Garimella, Saurabh Dwivedi, and Vishal Muttemwar. The discussion prompts included exploring notable instances where social media platforms required greater localized control; brainstorming conceivable mechanisms, policies, personnel, or institutions that might increase localized and culturally sensitive platform governance; and challenges with respect to the implementation of these ideas.

- Panelists discussed the essential nature of local language model development, including large language models (LLM) development, to support local language content moderation on complex idioms and slang.

- Some panelists suggested that localized decision making would be easier if an individual user's reach (or audience size) were permitted to grow with respect to their conduct online, or even through offline proxies for reputation. For example, posts could automatically be classified as respectful or disrespectful over time, allowing users to qualify for larger audiences. Panelists also talked about the risk of this system being gamed or prone to organized manipulation.

- Panelists explored mechanisms for devolving control to local levels through more democratic platform design, which could include bottom-up determination of community desires such as privacy preferences, processes for fact-checking, or moderation rules.

- Panelists imagined a role for piloting changes to platform design on a small

scale to explore how they respond to local challenges, which could include changes to the business model or additional governance layers.

The current discourse on platform and algorithmic governance in academic circles is looking at local governance as a possibility—governance by communities rather than self-governance by platforms or by the federal government. For this workshop, we invited practitioner perspectives on local governance in the case of social media in India.

This workshop included Joan Donovan, Kiran Garimella, and Soham De, who study misinformation as academics; Vishal Muttemwar, who uses social media to build political presence; Saurabh Dwivedi, who gave perspectives of influence; Ravi Iyer, a former product executive; Apar Gupta, with the civil society perspective; and Meg Young, who studies algorithmic governance.

One theme that emerged was a discussion on whether local governance is indeed a solution for India. There was consensus that the current design of platforms lacks cultural nuances, which is a problem. Panelists surfaced design needs such as building automated moderation tools with local data such as LLMs for regional language content; balancing automated moderation with user-controlled moderation; and balancing content moderation with promoting diversity of opinions, especially from marginalized users. The other major theme contested the transferability of ideas of local governance to India. The conversation on algorithmic and platform governance was dominated by Global North stakeholders; in this part of the discussion, the focus was more on the ecosystem around platforms that needs to be addressed such as catching up with legislation; thinking about social problems such as increasing digital literacy and educating citizens about their rights; and facilitating accountability, perhaps through alternative models, in such a way that it does not give more power to state censorship.

CHAPTER

TEN

PLATFORMS, EMPOWERMENT, AND CULTURAL AND BEHAVIORAL CHANGE

The second platform design roundtable—Platforms, Empowerment, and Cultural and Behavioral Change—explored the ways in which social media platforms can support social movements and health education. The panel of experts included Ram Mahalingam, Kiran Garimella, Munmun De Choudhury, Arfa Khanum Sherwani, Bezwada Wilson, Tanaya Narendra, Srijan Kumar, Kaneez Surka, Meena Kotwal, and Harnidh Kaur. The group shared examples in which platforms supported cultural and behavioral change; conceivable mechanisms, policies, personnel, or institutions that might support greater empowerment toward cultural and behavioral change; and the challenges and opportunities in implementing these ideas.

- Panelists shared the instrumental role that platforms played in a number of important public health wins, such as mobilizing the public to ask for the HPV vaccine.

- Panelists indicated that a huge share of reporting by journalists is falsely censored as violence or hate speech on social media platforms.

- Panelists also shared the deep risks of government censorship, for instance that more closely regulated platforms could be used as a cudgel against social change movements.

- One idea with uptake in the group was to certify experts such as public health professionals on the platform as reliable sources for health information. One panelist took part in an experiment to this end by YouTube; it helps users evaluate information amid many sources online.

- Panelists pointed to a consortium model as a means for demanding changes by technology companies without exposing online platforms to the risk of government censorship. For example, they considered how a coalition of non-governmental actors could interface directly with technology companies, such as the DIGIPUB News India Foundation, which was created by digital media companies with the goal of fostering a robust journalistic practice and civil society.

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

COPING WITH GENERATIVE AI, MISINFORMATION, AND HATE

The third and final platform design roundtable was attended by a healthy mix of academics and practitioners, including Tanushree Mitra, Monojit Choudhury, Srijan Kumar, Ashique KhudaBukhsh, Paramveer Dhillon, The Liver Doc and several graduate students from the University of Michigan. The discussion was facilitated by Soham De, Divya Ramesh, and Arshia Arya. The panelists brainstormed and shared emergent concerns with the advent of generative AI and then suggested ways in which these harms can be limited or eliminated.

- Panelists agreed that the most ubiquitous harm that is already taking place is the possibility of generating fake and false content, including doctored images, text, and voice data, that allow easy impersonation, defamation, and creation of hard-to-detect social bots.
- The Liver Doc raised several concerns related to over-reliance and blind faith, which may result in inaccurate and harmful self-diagnoses for health-related problems, making audiences more susceptible to health-related misinformation.
- Finally, several concerns about the ethical use of data, data provenance, and governance were voiced. There was also a general agreement that generative content may eventually challenge original content creation in digital platforms.

Proposed recommendations for best use were:

- Generative models are best to be used by experts (doctors, lawyers, journalists, fact-checkers) to reduce cognitive load, help in making efficient di-

agnoses, and as assistive technology. Access should be restricted among non-expert consumers.

- Industry–academia cooperation: Cooperative auditing (collaboration between method builders and auditors) and longitudinal audits, red teaming (building and breaking systems before public release) are tried and tested steps toward building robust and reliable models at scale.
- External (or internal) policy enforcement (such as what Bing can show and cannot, or a two-step disclaimer policy) may also be enforced to counter harms after a model has been released to consumers.

Part III

Student Papers

CHAPTER

TWELVE

FOLLOWING (F)INSTAGRAMS: DELINEATING SOCIAL BOUNDARIES ONLINE

Swasti Acharya
swasti.acharya@hotmail.com
MA Sociology, Jawaharlal Nehru University
BA Sociology & Anthropology, Ashoka University

The duality of "insta" vs. "finsta" is a binary that assumes that users can be more candid in the latter "fake" (often eulogized as "fun") Instagram = Finstagram account. While the "real" Instagram is more aesthetically pleasing, it indexes an added effort put into curating it. The paper argues that this is a false paradox in the perceived visual and sensory authenticity in the two account types of the same user. In this essay the author empirically describes users' experience mediating these two accounts through primary research centered around Berger and Luckmann's Social Construction of Reality, Robert Merton's *Insiders and Outsiders*, and Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* through this dialectic of so-called fake instas (*finsta)* and real instas (*rinsta)*. In doing so, it empirically addresses these questions: How does Instagram mediate the construction of self in everyday reality? How do users participate and perform in this construction?

Introduction

This essay unpacks the experience of navigating two Instagram accounts. Namely, a *finsta* which is assumed to stand as an antithesis to the *insta* or *rinsta*. The former is a combination of 'fake' and 'insta' leading to 'fake' Instagram or Finstagram (often eulogised as 'fun'). The latter is short for 'Instagram' which is implicitly one's 'real' profile.

On an app premised on audio-visual content, I argue, this dichotomisation offers a false paradox in the assumption that the *finsta* is where users can be more candid, more true-to-self, with fewer edits and filters. While the 'real' *insta* is more done-up, and more aesthetically pleasing suggesting a proportionately higher amount of effort that went into curating it, I propose that both formats are conscious careful presentations of the self.

Many people, including 24% of this study's respondents, use external apps to edit their content as well as to plan posts beforehand. These ancillary apps help the user get a feel of the 'overall aesthetic' or 'vibe' before revealing it to their audience. Reliance on such apps points towards an obvious investment in the user's online labour, but it does not mean that the non-reliance equals the non-curation of Feeds. That is, irrespective of an overt effort to curate, "people are concerned with the way others perceive them, motivating actors to manage their behaviour in order to present favourable and appropriate images to others" through more subtle cues and impressions [10], [1] even in their so-called 'fake' insta.

Review of Literature

French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* argues that cultural tastes are not naturally given indicators of what is 'good' and what is 'bad'. Instead, they are socially constructed phenomena where people manipulate and delimit the nature of tastes by using their knowledge of and familiarity with cultural standards thereby maintaining and reinforcing boundaries between themselves and 'lesser' groups. He writes,

> The economic and social conditions which they presuppose, the different ways of relating to realities and fictions, of believing in fictions and the realities they simulate, with more or less distance and detachment, are very closely linked to the different possible positions in social space and, consequently, bound up with the systems of disposition (habitus) characteristic of the different classes and class fractions [1].

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Consumption based on taste and preferences must then work in a manner to legitimise and rank certain traits as more appealing than others.

In the global, multicultural context of social media, it might not be impossible to find universal patterns and trends that reflect the tech-savvy youth's consumption of mass media and popular culture through the screen of their smartphones [13], [7]. But it could still be possible that the basic principles that motivate users across cultures and geographies are interconnected. This is because online social connections have propagated a sense of common and shared cultural knowledge according to which users behave and act [12].

Everyday participation in social media acquaints the user with managing impression formation and manipulating interpersonal actions in a way that presents themselves in a positive manner [4]. According to the Brunswik Lens Model, the behaviour of individuals and the artefacts produced by them are intended to reflect their personality through subtle cues enabling the observer to make inferences about the individual [9].

Next, the similarity-attraction hypothesis suggests that people are attracted by similar others and many social networks are structured in a manner that stems from existing social relationships [9], [5]. The role of friends in such contexts is amplified not only through the explicit statements they make, but also through physical attractiveness and perceive visual appeal [10]. For example, if a person's friend circle consists of other members who are considered popular, this automatically gives them a type of social currency and reinforces their status. In the case of Facebook, Walther et al. empirically present how "people made judgments about a target based on comments left by the target's friends and by the attractiveness of those friends" [11], pp. 45. This occurred even when they did not explicitly share the information because viewers assumed it to be sanctioned by virtue of the person's known relationship with the friend in question.

Similarly, *finstas* reveals the dichotomy of 'inner circle' and 'outer circles' which acquires legitimisation because it is a self-constructed realm of the 'public' and the 'private' [6]. This is the most critical element of delineating symbolic boundaries among social circles because we see how people come to be known by the company they keep [13], [11]. These symbolic boundaries are revealed in behavioural patterns of association that capture the character and pattern of social interactions by hierarchizing relationships and grouping members based on their shared habits and traits.

Subtle but important associations are also made through parlance: whether the person is able to articulate themselves in a manner that is considered 'cool' in

Table 12.0.1: No. of Instagram accounts

Sex	One only	More than one
Male	16	3
Female	19	12

Source: Data from survey responses, n=50

present-day social media etiquette. If not, then the categorisation of 'us' versus 'them' or 'inner circle' as opposed to 'outer circle' takes shape through 'acquaintances' and 'close friends', the 'public' or the 'private'. This was reaffirmed when participants recounted 'trust' and 'comfort' being the main factor in allowing people into their virtual space. The visible delineation of symbolic boundaries that maintain the distinction between the in-group and the out-group through *finstas* suggest that members do carefully design their 'fake' accounts.

Research Method and Findings

The primary research was conducted in the context of Indian Millennials and GenZ aged between 17-38 years old ($\overline{x} = 23$ years). Participants were recruited through snowball sampling in three linear phases online poll (n=65), survey (n=50), and in-depth interview (n=16). Respondents who showed interest in the poll were sent a detailed survey after which 16 were invited for an interview.

Of these interviews, 9 had a Finstagram account while 7 did not but followed their friend's *finstas*. Most of my respondents were in their early twenties. While more than 70% of the respondents came from English-speaking, upper-middle-class households in Delhi and Gurgaon, the remaining belonged to similar class backgrounds from Mumbai, Bangalore, Calcutta, and Ahmedabad. Less than 10% were Indians residing in Canada, Netherlands, and USA. The majority of the respondents were female (62%).

When someone follows their account, respondents consider three main things: whether they know them in real life (84%); whether they trust and/or like them enough (54%); whether there are mutual accounts they follow/are followed by (48%).

When they decide to follow someone, they consider the following things: the content on the feed (if visible) (98%); whether they know them in real-life (92%); to support and share their work if they feel it needs more visibility (74%); and finally, whether they would like to get to know then (54%). Only 24% of the respondents said the presence of mutual accounts was a motivation to follow someone. When

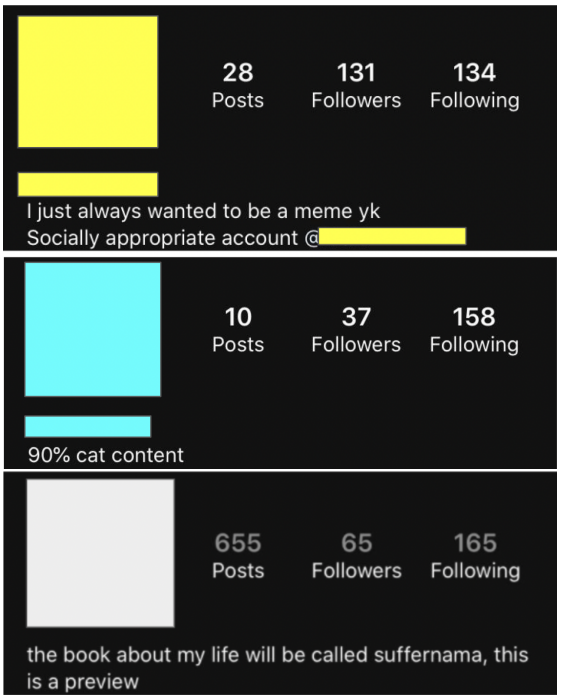

Figure 12.0.1: *Finstagram* bios of three respondents who participated in this study

asked whether the ratio of Followers to Following matters to the respondents, almost all respondents said that it did not matter to them after a point.

However, in the case of the *finsta*, these numbers reflect the purposeful segregation of their audience and choosing who has access to the content. In doing so, it reveals online labour that segregates audiences from accessing their public and private life.

In fact, more than 70% of respondents claimed to have a Close Friends list to filter who could view their Stories. Some of the reasons include: not wanting to share everything with the 'whole world'; sharing things with people they could trust or were comfortable knowing more private details about their lives; posting 'non-sense' content without spamming everyone who follows them; and finally, to hide things from family or co-workers who might follow them. For the 28% who said they did not have such a List, it was mainly because they already had a *finsta* to serve this purpose or that it was too difficult to decide whom to include and exclude.

While sharing content on their primary accounts, people refrain from sharing things: nudity (80%); alcohol, cigarettes, and other substance use (78%); personal details or details about family (68%); and strong language, violence, etc. (64%). When removing posts, users delete or archive things for the following reasons: being unhappy with the visual appeal (48%); due to factual incorrectness (30%); and no longer being in contact with the person(s) in the photograph (26%). Re-

spondents have described their main account as 'an aesthetic visual diary', 'an insight into my being', 'a way to keep good photos', 'happy things!', 'reflection of myself', 'participation in activities', 'places I've visited', etc. Users also said they were less likely to delete or archive content on their *finsta*. This boundary maintains 'publicly' acceptable information or imagery by ensuring the 'private' realm features their un-censored opinions and identities.

Despite the effort to move away from a hyper-curated feed on *finstas*, there is an underlying sense of affective attachment towards their feeds because it presents a version of themselves that is not entirely judgement free [8]. 96% of the respondents claimed that they believe there are certain 'unsaid rules' of using and behaving on Instagram. According to Roshni [1] , "Presenting a version of yourself, usually one that's happy, successful, enterprising, conventionally pretty, forcibly witty, and woke. It's anxiety-inducing, and its performance of it can be frustrating. There's also this added pressure to be righteous, liberal, and have an opinion on everything for the sake of sounding smart or clued in, which is often misplaced." On similar lines, Neil [2] said, "Wanting to portray your own life in an appealing way that soothes the ego undergirds this etiquette and general behaviour on IG. This is not the case for everyone, but for most from what I see. Because of COVID and the current rebellion against the police state in the US, people recently are starting to use their IG platforms less as an ego project and more as a tool to educate, spread awareness and essential information and uplift others' voices at such a critical time."

The quotes reaffirm two things: first, there is a widely accepted norm that dictates how visually appealing one's Feed is supposed to be (note: it cannot be too 'perfect'); second, the *finsta* becomes a space to deviate from this norm because it is assumed to be judgement-free; a space to move away from the existing dominant Instagram culture [3].

Not all users have identical experiences and even when the user is not trying to people please, the active effort of audience management in creating virtual safe spaces ultimately dictates the content they share. This is the core of my assertion: contrary to popular belief, manoeuvring *rinstas* / *finstas* requires precise, calculated articulation of oral and visual language that echoes and identifies oneself with an audience of close friends with purposeful intent.

This public-private dichotomy also suggests that people tend to place certain relationships as more valuable than other connections. In this process, some of them are ranked higher than others based on 'closeness', 'intimacy', and 'trust' and these privileged few have access to our 'cringe moments'.

[1] Name changed to maintain privacy.
[2] Same as above.

According to Melissa Dahl, author of *Cringeworthy: A Theory of Awkwardness*, cringe-worthy moments occur when we are yanked out of our own perspective, and we can suddenly see ourselves from somebody else's point of view [2]. The *finsta* allows the audience to cringe vicariously and develop a sense of solidarity because it reinforces how 'human' we are: embarrassing moments, mistakes, out-of-pocket ideas, and more. When we collectively laugh at such experiences, we bond over our shared human frailty and recognise that we have all arrogantly argued for something only to realise that it was ignorant or, we have all tried to present ourselves as 'cool' and 'likeable' and 'talented'. This shared absurdity, insecurity, and ridiculousness makes one feel less alone and more 'real'.

Conclusion

This Instagram phenomenon shows that users deviate norms of "public" social presentation and interaction [2] by going "backstage" to the private realm of *finstas* [4] is a careful act of self-presentation. We actively participate in presenting 'curated' versions of the self, based on the audience. In doing so, we manage and manipulate information that we consciously choose to share in a specific (visual) language of articulation. Dahl's idea of cringe serves a social purpose as it lays down the norms and rules that govern, mediate, and shape social interaction [11], [12], [3], [4].

Thus, irrespective of whether the Instagram grid is pleasing to the eye or not, we maintain personal identities through symbolic boundaries of online socialisation. By empirically studying the phenomena of *finstas*, I have tried to show how a space that was initially presumed to be judgement-free turns out to be embedded in the same social structures it sought to move away from. That is, the dichotomy of 'real' versus 'fake' Instagram does not entirely remove users from social norms of self-presentation but leads to the creation of separate but controlled social spaces.

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This paper is based on empirical research and first-person narratives shared by active Instagram users. The author is immensely grateful for being allowed into their virtual world and all information shared is with prior consent.

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CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

YOU WOULD NOT BELIEVE WHAT WE SAW!: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF PERFORMATIVITY AND EVERYDAYNESS IN FAMILY-VLOGS IN INDIA

Mridula Muralidharan, Sumra Alam
{mridula.m.97,sumra.alam95} @gmail.com
Centre for the Study of Social Systems (CSSS)
School of Social Sciences,
Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, India

Using the lenses of performativity and everydayness, this paper analyzes Indian family-vlogs on YouTube. It asks questions regarding the performativity of "sharenting" and the realness and the popularity of everyday life in family-vlogs. To answer these questions, the paper thematically analyzes videos of four popular Indian family-vloggers. It concludes that the performativity of parenting in family-vlogs reinforces heteronormative gender roles instead of challenging them. But it gives the video creators some agency to shape the portrayal of their family lives online, even though the performativity is often driven by the demands of the audience and the market. Moreover, the popularity of family-vlogs is based on the portrayal of everyday occurrences as significant, and gives mom-vloggers the scope to challenge perceptions about household work. The neoliberal context is important when one considers the interaction of the social media ecosystem with the economy and society.

Table 13.0.1: YouTube Channel Description

Channel Name	Subscriber Count	Total Views
Mom Com India	2.93 million	388,603,152
Indian Mom On Duty	691K	206,181,346
Flying Beast	7.86 million	3,381,453,747
Mumbiker Nikhil	3.96 million	1,524,646,588
All figures as on March 30, 2023		

Introduction

In the recent past, owing to the Indian State's favorable policies of digitalisation, as well as high investments from the private players in the technology-driven market, there appears to be a rise in internet users in the country. In 2015, while a mere 19 per cent of the Indian population had access to the internet, in 2022, however, it reached almost 60 per cent [1]. Reliance's Jio has been widely credited for the initial surge in the number of internet users in the country by offering fast 4G internet at cheaper rates [2]. Owing to these developments as well as the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic, content creation and therefore content creators have exploded on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube. A study by Mindshare India revealed that during the COVID-19 lockdown, YouTube witnessed a 20.5 per cent increase in its subscriber base in India [3]. The content creators produce lifestyle content, movie reviews, and recipe videos, and document their daily lives. The documentation includes family-vlogs as well. Despite a growing concern regarding the content, production and ethical considerations of family-vlogs, they seem to be generally well-received by the audience. In this essay, however, we shall be studying the family vloggers in India by thematically analyzing their content through the lens of 'performativity' and 'everydayness'. These concepts are discussed below. We approach this essay by asking two questions, firstly, what is the performativity of sharenting in family-vlogs on YouTube? Secondly, how does the 'everydayness' of family-vlogs on YouTube contribute to their popularity? In order to answer these questions, we analyzed the vlogs of four YouTubers from India who are popular for their family-centred content.

Methods

Using purposive sampling, we selected four family-vloggers from India with high subscriber counts, namely Mom Com India (2.91M subscribers), Indian Mom on Duty (691K subscribers), Flying Beast (7.87M subscribers) and Mumbiker Nikhil

(3.94M subscribers) and reviewed the five most-viewed family-vlogs on their respective channels. We watched the videos to identify certain patterns which were then arranged and analyzed as per the selected themes. Instead of being a linear process, the selection of themes and the identification of patterns were continuous in nature and developed as we researched and composed this paper. Under the theme of everydayness, we identified patterns related to the portrayal of family values, lifestyle, and religiosity. Both events and routines constituted the 'everydayness' of the vlogs. The 'performativity of sharenting' was evaluated by understanding the patterns related to the portrayals of the family's authority figure, primary caregiver, and 'involved' father and their activities. All twenty videos were analyzed as per the above-mentioned parameters. The data on themes and their constituting patterns have been arranged in the form of channel-wise tables in the Appendix to this paper.

The Performativity of 'Sharenting'

Campana, Van den Bossche and Miller (2020) believe that the act of 'sharenting labour' appears to have resulted in a change in the division of caregiving practices, with the adult male figure contributing more towards household chores which stands in contradiction to the heteronormative gender roles [4]. Their work discusses the gender-based prejudice of 'intensive mothering', but 'involved father' which seem to have lost their relevance in the recent past. A similar thought is echoed in Tambunan's (2020) work as well [5]. However, our examination of two popular father-operated family channels namely, Flying Beast and Mumbiker Nikhil revealed that instead of challenging the gender roles, the gendered division of labour in the household continues to persist. Both channels feature the mother indulging in caregiving roles, with the father being 'involved' in household chores. However, his participation is restricted to traditionally masculine jobs such as repairs or disciplining the child. On the other hand, the examination of two mom-operated channels, namely Mom Com India and Indian Mom on Duty unveiled how YouTube is utilised to share their daily routines and caregiving strategies. They share their children's meals, hair-care routines, and clothing among other things. Both creators present parts of their household routines in an organised and detailed manner, thus bringing out the effort that is put into accomplishing household tasks that would otherwise be considered the default duty of the female.

The immense popularity and consumption of family-vlogs have led them to become a commercially viable opportunity in the attention-driven economy [4]. Nichols and Selim (2022) while citing Khamis, Ang, and Welling (2016) explain

the attempt by social media influencers to develop their identity and to project it as a 'personal brand' that would attract sponsorship, therefore, generating income [6]. While vlogging could be considered as a form of documenting the 'reality', filmmaker Satyajit Ray (2011) would problematise the 'authenticity' and the 'realness' that these vlogs seem to portray [7]. While interrogating the nature of documentaries as a depiction of reality, Ray argues that because of the scrutiny of the camera, 'reality' is compromised and influenced, and instead would consider them as its 'creative expressions.' Similarly, a study revealed how social media influencers include their children in their projects to portray and present positive imagery of parenting and family life [6]. Herein, we cite Goffman (1956) whose theory of 'performativity', a reflection on the role theory and impression management- wherein the 'actors' on the 'front stage' that is in front of others, behave how they wish to be perceived, this is different from the 'backstage' which operates in the private spaces [8]. Likewise, Cooley (1902) used the term 'looking glass self' to explain and describe how socialisation shapes our self-image and influences how we view ourselves [9]. Therefore, it could be reasoned how the discourse of parenthood in vlogs is shaped in response to the need and demands of the audience and the market.

The Popularity of Everyday Life

Our analysis of the four YouTube channels has led us to identify the following factors that contribute to the popularity of family-vlogs. Firstly, 'attractive' and 'controversial' thumbnails are commonly used. Known as clickbait, the creator relies on eye-catching or deceitful video thumbnails and titles like 'Had to rush her to the hospital' (Flying Beast), 'Skyu got stuck under the bed' (Mumbiker Nikhil), 'Beta Beta Hota Hai Aur Bahu Bahu' (Indian Mom on Duty). Secondly, by portraying a sanitized and carefully curated image these vlogs seem to provide their viewers with an 'ideal' and 'functional' family practising aspirational lifestyles. For instance, the frequent presence of Mom Com India's parents in her vlogs illustrates their importance in her family life. Thirdly, instructional videos ranging from meal preparations for children, home repairs and even product recommendations (often sponsored) occupy considerable space in their content, thereby increasing the chances of attracting a wider range of viewers.

Thus, the popularity of family-vlogs emanates from the fact that they can portray the most ordinary events in a significant way where everyday tasks become recognisably important for the upbringing of children and the strengthening of familial relationships. However, it is a combination of the mundane and the

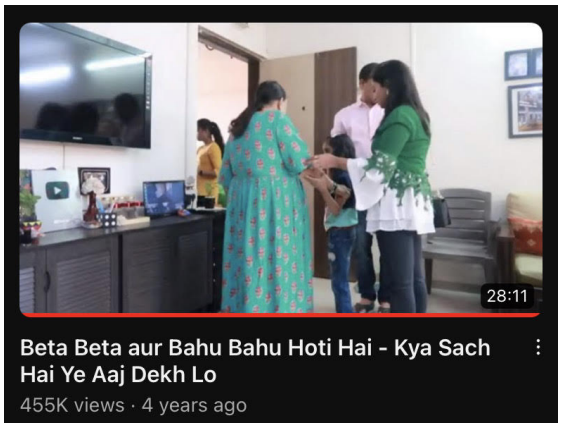

Figure 13.0.1: Example of Clickbait Title (Source: *Indian Mom on Duty, YouTube*)

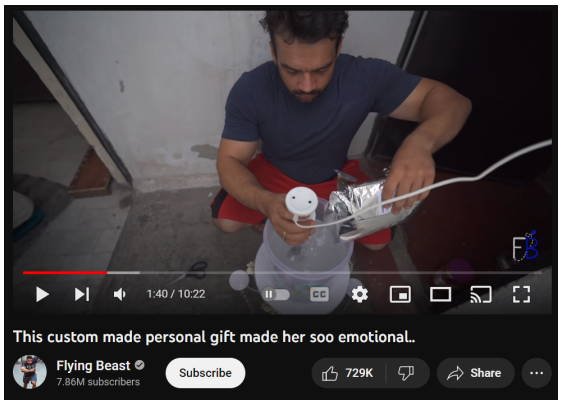

Figure 13.0.2: Example of home improvement (Source: *Flying Beast, YouTube*)

eventful that comprises the content of family-vlogs. As Veena Das (2020) conceptualizes the 'everyday' arguing that it constitutes both the ordinary as well as the extraordinary, moreover, the lives of individuals are shaped by not just 'events' or catastrophic happenings, but also through the ordinary happenings of everyday domestic and marital lives [10]. As discussed previously, Indian family-vlogs seem to reinforce heteronormative parenting roles. However, according to Strangelove (2010) despite the reinforcement of dominant structures, family-vlogs do offer the scope to challenge them, owing to their amateur production [11]. Both mom-influencers exercise their agency in how they portray their daily lives online.

Indian Mom on Duty in her vlogs shares her early-morning routine to prepare meals for her family and manages to highlight the effort she puts into her household chores. However, she edits the parts where her daughter refuses to eat the prepared meal, and later, expresses her disappointment. Similarly, Mom Com India's detailed descriptions of her children's routines highlight her efforts at household management. Tasks which would otherwise be taken for granted by us are captured through vlogs highlighting their significance in family life. In social theory, the 'everyday' is often a subject matter of research. As cited in Strangelove (2010), a scholar like Lefebvre (1947) who has studied modernity, has discussed the rise of capitalism and its effect on ordinary life [11]. Strangelove's (2010) work on YouTube further utilizes this concept of 'everydayness' to study social interactions in virtual spaces [11]. It is the quality of ordinariness of these vlogs-both in terms of production quality as well as their content, that underlies their popularity. Moreover, it is when vloggers combine this ordinariness with other influencer strategies that they can reach a wide audience.

Conclusion

Lefebvre (1987) discusses the impact of modernity and rationality on the nature of the 'everyday' and emphasizes how daily life is as much influenced by capitalism as are formal institutions such as the State and the economy [7]. As a result, mundane life begins to be characterized by an 'organized passivity' where individuals have little control over the various aspects of their lives. One can argue that much of what constitutes the daily family life and leisure time of individuals is heavily influenced by prevailing dominant ideologies. Like elsewhere, India has experienced a shift in its economy, culture, and society due to the onset of neoliberalism. In the case of family-vlogs, the lifestyles of social media influencers are also centred around consumption. Large parts of their vlogs discuss their fashion, travel, and other such practices including hauls and reviewing home products

in their vlogs. Interestingly, all four influencers identify with the middle-class in their videos but promote lifestyles that are highly aspirational for their viewers. The high viewership count of these vlogs leaves little doubt about their ability to influence many people.

Our discussion analysing the 'performativity' and 'everydayness' of YouTube family-vlogs has brought to light a few issues that warrant further research. First, is the idea of aspirational lifestyles and their promotion by social media influencers which can be examined in the light of the consumption culture in the neoliberal economy. Second, is the rising importance of advertising in the social media ecosystem which has managed to challenge existing social norms while establishing new ones. In family-vlogs, both these issues emerge, and future research can give better insights into the relationship of social media with the economy and society.

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CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

BACK TO THE FUTURE: RETURN OF THE STAR AS AN INFLUENCER

Akriti Rastogi
akriti.miranda@gmail.com
PhD Candidate, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Starting with the iconic actress Neena Gupta's Instagram post about looking for work in the Hindi film industry, this paper aims to locate the ideas of old media stardom and place them in a new media framework where stars emulate influencer archetypes. Using examples from Instagram accounts of leading starlets like Zeenat Aman and Neena Gupta, the paper maps these ideas of social media stardom to interpret how influencers inform stardom and its appropriations of an image-based platform like Instagram. An endless cycle of star–fan association ensues with the star resurfacing after eons of absence from the public eye in a digital avatar. These affordances spell a shift in star–fan association from handwritten fan letters to selfies with stars and also exemplify the never-ending nostalgia shop of the Internet that finds ways to remediate the star as memes. Tracing these posts and media events, the paper analyzes the emergent shifts in the registers of stardom in the era of screens dominated by social media and selfies.

Introduction

- Consider the image of a Neena Gupta posting about looking for work in the film industry in 2017. The post she made on her lesser-known Instagram

Figure 14.0.1: Neena Gupta's post shared by her daughter

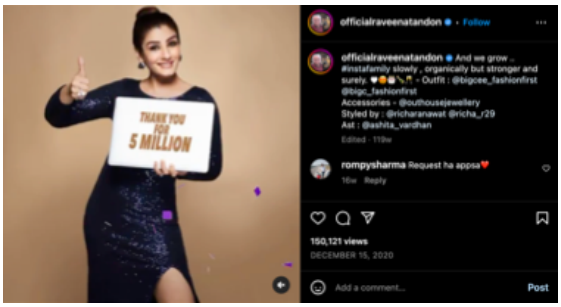

Figure 14.0.2: Raveena Tandon's Instagram post

account, was shared on her influencer daughter Masaba Gupta's Instagram handle as seen in Fig. 14.0.1. Masaba posted how her mother had been really brave in considering the space of the platform as a means of connecting with the industry that seemed to have forgotten her glorious career as a soap opera director

and refined actress, albeit in character parts primarily. Now consider the return of the 90s with starlets like Karishma Kapoor, Sushmita Sen, Raveena Tandon (Fig. 14.0.2) and Urmila Mantondkar making a comeback with second innings as influencers speaking about their skincare and fitness regime and hook steps that delighted the childhood of millennials. Nostalgic returns to a past lost in the annals of VHS tapes and satellite television make a slow comeback through social media. The return to this past continues, with each new entrant in the visual landscape of Instagram posts. Celebrity capital, as Olivier Driessens (2013) suggests for the era of social media platforms, emerges as an additional realm of power and value, wherein popularity and celebritydom serve the individual to garner more of the power that has hitherto defined their career [1].

Thus, stars like Zeenat Amaan, with their posts about finding a new channel for connecting with their fan base old and new, is an emergent space within platforms like Instagram, wherein it is not just the older population of platform users that identify with the star, but it is also the younger generation

Figure 14.0.3: ASCI's report on influencer archetypes

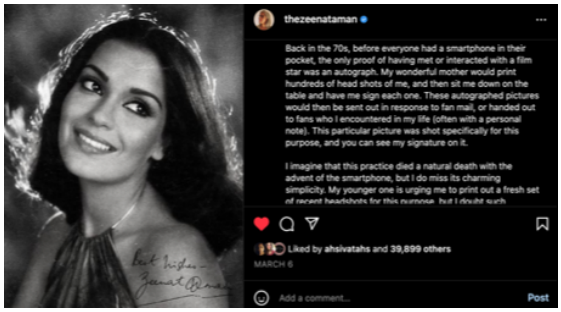

Figure 14.0.4: Zeenat Amaan's post about autographing headshots for her fan mail

of people who have little to no association with the star and yet connect with the vulnerable realities of human life through the lens of stardom. I open with Neena Gupta in my analysis, as she was the first to understand the space of Instagram as an influencer and use her network to drive it towards her return to commercial Hindi cinema. While we have examples of star registers on platforms, her post opens up the question of the vulnerabilities of a star on the platform, and how social media bends stardom into the logics of immediacy and influencer economy to serve the function of stardom.

- In a recent report (Fig. 14.0.3) on influencer archetypes on Social media platforms, ASCI (Advertising Standards Council of India) suggested how influencers are of many predictable typologies, wherein stars with tenor pre-existing paraphernalia of celebrity are easily rendered as influencers. [2] So, when Neena Gupta makes a post about connecting with her Instagram audience, it is a connection back to her audiences that supported her work in a previous media generation. Yet, it takes Masaba Gupta's post to make it visible. The realms of visibility offered within the premise of a social media platform are the locus of questions that warrant responses on what it takes to be heard and seen within the platform space. And while in case of Zeenat Amaan's posts about autographing headshots for her fan mail (Fig.

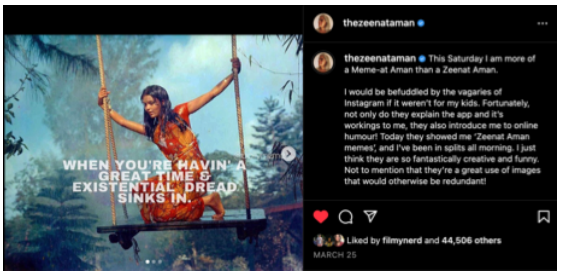

Figure 14.0.5: Zeenat Amaan's post of her image remediated as a meme

Figure 14.0.6: Neena Gupta's latest release promotions

14.0.4) are an anecdote and a relic reminding of the star-fan intimacies, her social media posts attempt to do the same, even when she claims that the camera phone is at best short-lived proximity, wherein the star selfie is a fleeting encounter as opposed to the memorabilia quality of star-fan mails. Understanding the grounds of affinity in the star-fan assemblage is the baseline for making sense of how a celebrity from the old media world operates in the social media influencer economy. These tugs at heart in nostalgic registers of their social media posts reaffirm our cinephilic faith and suggest how paratexts of any film and their star cast has an enduring afterlife given the right set of conditions on the social media platform.

- When Neena Gupta made a return to the screen through her social media presence, she was seen in short films on YouTube, yet it was a statement in the Hindi film industry that there weren't any parts written and crafted for women who were middle-aged and older.

  Indeed, as one traces the stardom forays of Amitabh Bachchan's persona that refuses to fade, actresses from his generation like Zeenat Amaan have made a recent comeback on screen through Instagram. Her celebrity status at once qualifies her in the position of an opinion leader and hence influencer on the platform who shares her work experience as a starlet of an era gone by, curating her experience of working in a film industry that was ready to represent women outside the confines of homes, and women who had a voice and choice to exercise. In contrast to the contemporary stars on social

Figure 14.0.7: Zeenat Amaan's post taking an auto ride to a friend's birthday party

media platforms that share detailed accounts of the outfit of the day and gym routines, the older generation of stars has this human presence reminding of a world still untouched by 'neoliberal individualism' (Brown, 2015). [3] In their return to social media screens as influencers, the older generation of stars find a space to connect their stories with a newer generation that may not have been privy to their work. It is interesting to note how the conventional registers of stardom resurface as remediated images (be it posts or memes) from an older era in the posts shared by Zeenat Amaan and Neena Gupta (Fig. 14.0.5).

- The Film Industry's logics of stardom and the performing body of the Star adopts the social media influencer codes of retailing old stories and historicizing the past for the present generation. While Gupta's mobilization of platform visibility led her to return to the silver screen with a string of middle and old-aged characters, there are other elements of this ouroboric exchange wherein film stars from the 90s find themselves caught as the middle generation, occasionally performing the OOTD and work out posts, or behind the scenes events (Fig. 14.0.6). Instagram, being a primarily visual platform, serves as a kind of gallery of negotiations that different generations of stars make to fit into the straight jacket of platform logics. Further, contemporary stardom has been dominated by the entourage narrative, yet the older generation's social media presence speaks of the negotiations made by starlets to thrive in a work culture where the leading women were a tokenistic minority. Zeenat Amaan, here is a pertinent example of honing the platform for a voice from within the film industry, about the film industry. Her posts have readily situated the issues of the gendered pay gaps and the travesties of paparazzi culture

- When a voice gets branded into identity-driven logics, the work of these older generation stars speaks of how a platform conforms every user to the singular

Figure 14.0.8: Sushmita Sen's Instagram post promoting Aarya (2019-)

Figure 14.0.9: Dharmendra's Instagram post

logic of representation. Indeed, when Amaan shares taking an auto ride to a friend's birthday party (Fig. 14.0.7), it is a moment of celebrification, an ordinary persona turning famous, in reverse (Driessens, 2013). [4] While the younger generation shares their skincare routines and brand collaborations, the older generation is calmer and often refuses to enter the brand bargain - wherein a star owing to their presence on social media platforms ought to conform and create a celebrity line of products. These entrepreneurial shifts in stardom are drawn readily from the influencer economy, wherein the aim is to keep the target audience hooked on the social media handle of the influencer. So, when Sushmita Sen revives her star persona (Fig. 14.0.8) as the central feminine force behind a streaming platform show, Aarya (2019-), it is her acting career that situates her as an artist from a simpler older time, along with her social media influence through her posts.

Celebrity culture is equally a site of celebration and derogation (Marshall, 2015), so it is not lost on social media platforms, that these women often face trolling in response to the posts they share. [5] Indeed, to reconcile with platform logics, the paraphernalia of communication experts and public relations specialists inform their influencer personas. Neena Gupta is singularly an interesting case study in understanding these transitions. While her designer daughter Masaba Gupta's persona supplements her work, and vice versa, her foray into mainstream cinema has meant her refashioning into a contemporary star who often shares her

new projects and promotes them on Instagram. While women, in particular, have occupied a large part of these conversations on celebrification, influencer economy and entourage, the men from Neena Gupta or Zeenat Aman's generation, barring Amitabh Bachchan, have not necessarily created an afterlife as social media influencers. Returning to the question of platform logics, the work of crafting social media posts has largely been attributed to unpacking digital cultures. However, social media presents as an alternative digital screen with an afterlife for a star persona, thereby creating an alternative online ecosystem for "moving" images (Vohra, 2023). [6] The visual culture created by platforms suggests how women, in particular, find a room of their own and a voice to hone within these spaces, whereas the men contend with obscure registers of celebrity persona. Male counterparts like Dharmendra (Fig. 14.0.9), for example, are not able to capitalize their social media influence to revive their stardom. Additionally, while these are sporadic examples at best, it would be interesting to find what the likes of starlets like Jaya Bachchan, Waheeda Rehman and Rekha could afford through a comeback on screen via social media.

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CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

UNPACKING THE IMPACT OF THE TIKTOK BAN ON LOCAL CONTENT CREATORS AND THE RISE OF INDIANIZED SOCIAL MEDIA APPS

Shivangi Garg
garg_shivangi@yahoo.com
Indian Institute of Information Technology, Bangalore

This paper investigates the repercussions of the TikTok ban in 2020 and the subsequent migration of local content creators to alternative platforms, with a particular focus on the identity negotiation of the marginalized LGBTQIA+ community. The author positions this paper as an exploration of the displacement experienced by rural young queers in expressing their queerness following the ban. TikTok was a platform that transcended class barriers and provided an equal platform for socioeconomically diverse users. However, its ban led to the emergence of Indianized social media apps that have further segregated the classes. The author argues that this phenomenon requires academic attention because the rise of these Indian apps coincides with the overshadowing of right-wing populism. By exploring these complex dynamics, this paper contributes to the understanding of the impact of digital media on the social fabric of contemporary India.

Introduction

Co-creation, discussions, and modifications of user-generated content are a few dimensions of social media that make it a highly interactive platform. The platforms

cater to content creators, where they can express their identities [1]. Herein, the viewers on the platform interact with content that relates to their identities, and interests. Tiktok, a video-sharing platform capitalises on the ability to create and recreate content accessible in fifteen to thirty seconds short-form video [1]. For instance, the primary way to share personal experiences is by recreating dance trends [1].

TikTok appears to be a platform that semi-urban, digitally unbanked users seem to prefer [3]. Often the semi-rural young Indian Tiktokers, choose to dance to regional songs or Bollywood hits. For instance, men wearing sarees and recreating effeminate dance moves which is receptive by a larger Indian rural audience. The article narrates several Indian TikToker accounts, emphasising how the formerly cohesive digital world, which overcame past divisions, was fragmented by the divisions that exist in the physical world. The unifying space that once transcended old divisions of caste and homophobia in the country, vanished after the TikTok Ban. An Indian regional content creator accounts for the platform as "I've never seen a platform celebrate so many male belly dancers or male makeup artists or gay couples." [13]

Nitish Pahwa's article reasons Tiktok as a platform that managed to transcend caste, religion, and other societal barriers in a highly stratified society. The author owes it to an addictive algorithm where the user's engage in content around lip-syncs and skits, and as well as its role as an "escape from a repressive government" [8] during the pandemic. Hence, TikTok allowed for greater social mobility and a breaking down of traditional hierarchies.

In this paper, I examine the aftermath of the self-expression of marginalized Indian local content creators at the behest of the TikTok ban in India and the overshadowing of right-wing populism. I position this paper as an exploration of the displacement experienced by rural young queers in expressing their queerness following the ban.

15.0.1 From Shared Struggle to Isolation: The TikTok Ban

On 29th June 2020, the government banned TikTok from arguing in favour of the "integrity of India, defence of India, security of the state and public order". TikTok's user base in India extended up to 200 million monthly active users. With its sudden disappearance, it created a void and displaced content creators from mainstream platforms.

Pushpesh Kumar and Debomita Mukherjee [2], have explored the sociological context of underprivileged TikTokers who were devastated by the ban. Their work draws on the different accounts of rural TikTokers who rose to fame despite their

marginalisation due to their caste. It is an exploration of how low-wage, informal labourers such as barbers, watchmen, rickshaw drivers, tailors, and other lower-class content creators got a chance to make a possible career in entertainment through TikTok. Although the question that remains unanswered is what platforms did they migrate to and negotiate their identities when they were rendered invisible after the ban. I aim to focus on the LGBTQIA+ sect within the rural marginalised youth of TikTok users.

Therefore, the TikTok ban rendered a loss of community, and the equaliser that TikTok was between different social classes was lost. To fill the gap, Indianised social media apps emerged. The emergence can be tied to a furthered class segregation where the upper and the lower classes do not co-exist. Given the rise of Indian apps, the overshadowing of right-wing populism requires adequate academic attention.

15.0.2 The Death of an Equaliser: TikTok

TikTok transformed into a platform that isolated different segments of society, allowing inhabitants of distant villages to connect with prominent public figures and achieve a level of fame that was previously unattainable. In contrast to the adding lip-sync of Bollywood romantics numbers, the urban elite peers on TikTok pick trendy songs.

The social media applications get segregated based on the audiences and the performative acts. For instance, Instagram has turned into a platform where affluent elites exhibit their destination weddings, and extravagant dinners, indicating their privilege [12]. This creates a divide.

Whereas, young rural TikTokers have millions of likes and lakhs of followers despite being caste-class marginalised and lacking cultural capital. As short-video content creation reigns supreme on the social media platform TikTok, its accessibility without the need for specialized knowledge or formal literacy has resulted in its prevalence. Its democratic character can be attributed to its accessible interface, which effectively surmounted cultural and linguistic barriers, giving access to content in 15 regional languages. Furthermore, its compatibility with low-cost devices facilitated greater inclusivity [13].

As per Thakur's [4] findings, despite popular belief, women comprise almost half of the leading influencers on TikTok in India and have amassed an extensive following of tens of millions, therefore providing a platform to local content creators.

An article highlights the rise to the popularity of Shaikh, who hails from the largest Mumbai slum, assisted his father in managing an unprofitable "nightie"

business, consistently created between TikTok for a year. TikToks give an insight into the socio-economic lives of domestic spaces such as kitchens and bedrooms.

Before the TikTok ban, different socio-classes coexisted in the platform, wherein, the algorithm filtered viewers' content according to their preferences and interests. Instagram inherently does not provide space for lower-class content creators to exist as their content limits their reachability.

Loss of a Community for Local Queer Content Creators

One of the first studies on digital queer activities in India was carried out by Mitra and Gajjala [6]. They examined meanings associated with labels as "gay," "lesbian," and "bi," as well as how bloggers encoded these meanings as parts of their South Asian or Indian identities in transnational online spaces. They focused on queer blogging practises among Indian and Pakistani bloggers within the South Asian digital diaspora. The authors followed the history of early queer movements online and drew attention to issues with class and digital exclusion as well as the 'othering' of trans identities like kothis and hijras.

From a different perspective, Mitra [5] looked at the queer blogging community as an interpretive one, and how blogging helps to expand and support the queer community. Another study, [7] demonstrates that members of the Hijra community in Bangladesh are now active users of digital venues. The investigation focused on Facebook use by the Hijras and unveils how the platform's design failed to address Hijra user's needs around privacy and self-presentation and instead promoted violence against them by not accounting for local cultural and community contexts in Bangladesh.

The contours of expression of queer couples in India were prominent on TikTok. A glimpse of a gay couple Ram and Rudhra (@ramrudhra), used TikTok as a medium to profess their love by lip-syncing to Tamil songs. Another user by the name of Sunny (le)One, cross-dressed and garnered over 37M likes [9].

LGBTQ artists on TikTok, highlighted the intricate understandings of the relationship between non-Western digital media and the day-to-day experiences of socially ostracized groups in the periphery of mainstream platforms.

The Rise of Indianised Social Media Platforms

Although, the user interface and filter options on Instagram are superior to those on Moj. TikTok created a gap in the market that local entrepreneurs were quick

to fill. After the ban, a few short-form video apps, Moj and Josh, Chingari, and Roposo, among others, emerged for Indian consumers. As Moj was designed to be a regional localised Indian social media platform, it further secluded the lower-class content creators.

With the advent of localised social media platforms, the assertion of the right-wing ideology would be pushed within the algorithm. Chingari appears to be betting on the nationalist sentiment that has been increasingly prevalent in India's political climate to drive its growth [10]. The app has relegated its news aggregation section to the sidelines, which was primarily attracting an audience over the age of 35 that came to the platform to consume news. Instead, the platform plans to introduce a one-minute news bulletin video clip, as a replacement for the text format, to broaden its reach and appeal to a wider demographic. By positioning itself as a locally developed alternative to foreign social media apps, Chingari is tapping into the patriotic fervour that has swept the country.

Numerous organisations have expressed concern over the Modi administration's propensity for using a variety of policy tools to achieve political objectives. The Internet Freedom Foundation, an entity committed to safeguarding online freedoms in India, highlighted the fact that the recent incident of web censorship has had a more extensive impact on Indian citizens than any prior instances. Apar Gupta, the executive director of the organization, noted that in the current political milieu in India, nationalistic sentiment is likely to be prioritized over other factors [8, 13].

Hence, the advent of homegrown apps raises concerns about the potential of right-wing ideology being propagated within their algorithms. TikTok as a global platform transcends the ritual of content replication and self-expression, wherein the socio-classes can coexist.

To Conclude

This paper examines the aftermath of the self-expression of marginalised young rural TikTokers at the behest of the TikTok ban. The ban created a void, wherein the upper-class and the lower-class content creators were not able to co-exist, rendering the social media platforms divided.

Author's Positionality

The author identifies as a cis-gender female, queer, and has been a part of online and offline queer spaces in New Delhi and Bangalore.

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CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

BLURRED LINES IN SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCING: EXPLORING THE CONSEQUENCES OF USING PERSONHOOD AS A PLATFORM

Shambhavi Gupta
sg.shambhavigupta@gmail.com
Indian Institute of Management, Indore

This position paper discusses the rise of social media influencing in India and its implications for content and consumerism as the lines blur between personal and professional personas, raising concerns about transparency, misinformation, mental health, and materialism. This paper brings these issues to light through specific examples and argues that to address them, there is a need for a collaborative effort among consumers, regulators, brands, agencies, and influencers.

Introduction

In India, social media influencing landscape has become multifaceted and complex, with the rise of influencers who have amassed wealth, fame, social following and significant professional milestones. The implications of this culture on how we define content and consumerism warrant deeper exploration. Historically, Indians have seen singers, actors, and other artists achieve the aspirational status of a superstar based on their skills and projects. Their content has always been distinct from their personal lives unlike the influencer whose personal life fuels their content. For instance, Shah Rukh Khan gained fame through his acting roles in films

such as "Swades" and "Chak de India," and his success was measured through his mega, big budgeted projects. Celebrities like him were the 'original influencers' who received brand endorsements and dictated consumer behavior. Media consumption in India, once dominated by celebrities, is now being taken over by social media influencers who have smaller but more engaged audiences. Even the traditional celebrity is trying to keep up with the modern tools of influence by being active and engaged on their social media platforms.

Scholars have noted the emergence of new forms of celebrity in the digital age. According to Gillespie (2010), social media platforms have transformed the ways in which we understand and perceive a celebrity, as individuals can now accrue fame and influence outside of traditional media industries through new forms of cultural capital (Marvick and Boyd, 2011). Rajput and Jain (2021) found that consumers are more likely to purchase products endorsed by social media influencers than those endorsed by traditional celebrities.

Influencers are the typical Indian Aam Aadmi, who have built a following based on their niche interests such as food, fashion, travel, etc. They command a substantial portion of content consumption on the internet and hold sway over their audience's interests and wallets. Their followers dictate how powerful their platform is and the kind of opportunities they get. Never have celebrities experienced such direct access and such great degree of control their 'fans' have on their professional lives. Influencer accessibility has led to an increase in aspirations of their viewers. Viewers are witnessing 'celebrity' as a function of social media algorithms rather than pure skill. Social media algorithms underpin the attention economy – they are fast, addictive, favor virality and can often be manipulative. The content creator economy rides on the wave of these algorithms, raising grievous questions about transparency and authenticity of the new age celebrity.

The rise of social media influencing has blurred the lines between personal and professional personas, transforming the ways in which we understand fame and influence in India.

Some of the major issues arising from the burgeoning influencer culture in India are:

Lack of transparency and authenticity in influencer marketing:

A deep dive into a major Indian Skincare Influencer's Instagram feed showcased that in a month, she recommended a total of 147 skincare products as "skincare essentials" as paid promotions. Her followers spotted paid collaborations for prod-

ucts she had earlier announced did not work for her and weren't good in quality. In this scenario, does the influencer's accountability lie with their audience that has given them the platform or does it lie with the brands who are paying them for advertisement aka promotions?

The influencer culture in India has blurred the lines between advertisement and content. Influencer endorsements can sway purchasing decisions of their followers, and brands are willing to pay big money to tap into this influence. Some brands have made it big by riding on the back of influencer marketing. Contrastingly, Nair and Gupta (2021) found that the Indian consumer is growing skeptical of influencer marketing and often perceives it as dishonest. Lack of transparency and authenticity in influencer marketing has become a concern.

To address this issue, the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) introduced guidelines for influencer marketing in 2019. These guidelines require influencers to disclose their paid partnerships with brands and to ensure that their posts do not mislead consumers. However, compliance with these guidelines remains a challenge. Bansal and Kohli (2021) found that many influencers in India do not follow the ASCI guidelines adequately. Enforcing these guidelines will require a collaborative effort between regulators, brands, agencies, and influencers to ensure that the consumer interests are protected. This is difficult to achieve because influencer contracts can be highly informal in nature, such as barter, exposure, etc.

The burden of transparency is not on influencers alone. Mamaearth, an Indian skincare brand positions its products as natural and free of harmful chemicals. The brand has observed meteoric growth thanks to influencer marketing even though they do not even manufacture their products. Their products are sourced from a mass manufacturer, but they are marketed as something unique and innovative that the brand has worked on. The parent company paid 3958 influencers in March to September 2022 for promotions and is now seeking to go public with a valuation of over INR 1,000 Cr (The Morning Context) with just INR 14 Cr in profits. The company tripled its spend on social media marketing during the pandemic.

Many Indian skincare brands took advantage of the growing market (for active-based and natural skincare) and launched with little quality control using aggressive influencer marketing as a crutch.

Spread of Misinformation

The rise of influencer culture in India has contributed to the changing media landscape, with social media tools like Instagram Reels and YouTube shorts (short

form video content) becoming increasingly popular among young people (Chen & Sharma, 2021). This has disrupted traditional media channels like TV, newspapers, etc. and created new opportunities for content creators and brands alike (Kumar & Mirani, 2021). There is increasing pressure by platform algorithms on influencers to create engaging content that is concise and catchy (Nair, 2021). The virality of content is unrelated to the skill and the actual substance of it – it is often algorithm dictated.

One example of this is finance content, which has seen a meteoric rise on content platforms due the ability of reels to make it more digestible and understandable for the audience who does not have training or expertise in the domain (Maheshwari, 2021). However, this content can also be misleading as it often does not convey complete information and can reduce the most important aspects to a catchy hook (Hans, 2021). This is an extremely dangerous precedent as finance creators offer advice on savings and investments – often recommending financial products and services to their followers who might act on the advice without research. The terms and conditions of these financial products are often not conveyed to the audience. The 2024 Union Budget was a common topic covered by Indian 'finfluencers', with many being called out for spreading misinformation or a blatantly wrong interpretation of the new tax regime introduced by the government. The SEBI (Securities and Exchange Board of India) is now coming up with new regulations for these 'finfluencers', where only SEBI-registered entities will be able to offer financial advice on social media.

Social media content is not regulated the way traditional advertisements are; the platforms themselves moderate the content. Lack of cultural and geographical context leads to promotion of blatant misinformation, harmful content, cultural appropriation, and stereotypes. There is an entire generation of social media users that relies excessively on the niche influencer of their choice for recommendations about the best skincare, travel destinations, style guide, or even personal finance. Confirmation bias can also lead viewers to believe that popular sentiments expressed on social media are really facts. Packaged content designed to capture attention might pass off as actual information or news.

Health and Finance are two domains where an average consumer turns to the internet for better comprehension. This democratization of information is good until the consumer starts acting on influencers' advice to better their finances or improve their health. Here, regulatory responsibility is very nascent. Anyone with a Social Media account can start creating content, without research or qualifications, and it can be difficult to disassociate fact from content that is carefully crafted to garner engagement. Even if regulations are put in place, enforcing them

can be challenging. In 2020, ASCI had to issue warnings to several celebrities and influencers for promoting products that made false claims about their benefits (ASCI, 2020). However, the ASCI has limited powers to enforce its guidelines, and influencers can quickly delete posts or change their content to avoid regulatory action.

Formation of Para-social relationships and mental health implications:

The pressure to maintain an image consistent with their content on social media can take a toll on the mental health of influencers. Influencers are both accessible and aspirational, unlike Bollywood celebrities who are only aspirational but inaccessible which allows them to take on projects that are not associated with their personal brand and opinions and have a diverse range of opportunities. However, the influencer whose entire personality is their brand, the constant need for likes, followers, and engagement for their content can lead to anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues (Fardouly et al., 2020).

Para-social relationships are prevalent in influencer culture in India, where followers believe that they have a personal connection with the influencer, even though it is often one-sided and illusory (Veena & Sruthi, 2020). Followers perceive themselves as being friends with influencers and therefore feel entitled to know personal details about their lives (Blinka & Smahel, 2009). Since the degree of access is very high, influencers readily see the discourse on their personal lives unfold on their own platforms. Kritika Khurana, fashion and lifestyle influencer, recently announced separation from her husband on Instagram. Her wedding was featured heavily on her platform, and her followers got to follow along as she picked outfits, venues, and décor for it. When she announced her separation, it came as a shock to her audience who had always seen the pair as an ideal couple who had a fairytale wedding. Her followers made the argument that if they had such access to her marriage so far, they even deserved to know the reason for the split which she wasn't comfortable sharing publicly. They opined that by the virtue of her being a public influencer – she forgoes the right to privacy. If she can share the good parts of her life, then why not the bad?

The commodification of authenticity in influencer culture has been well-documented. In her book, 'No Filter: The Inside Story of Instagram', Sarah Frier highlights how influencers often present a highly curated and filtered version of their lives on social media to maintain their brand image and appeal to their audience (Frier, 2020). This creates a false sense of intimacy between the influencer

and their followers, leading to a sense of entitlement on the part of the audience. In a personal interview, a fashion influencer (who requested to be anonymous) revealed that she often finds herself making content with her partner about how good her relationship is, even if she is not on speaking terms with him.

In a survey conducted by Hopper HQ, 42% of influencers reported that social media had a negative impact on their mental health. This can be attributed to the constant need to be present online, create content, and maintain a certain image, which can lead to feelings of burnout, anxiety, and depression.

Promotion of excessive materialism and gentrification:

The influencer culture in India often promotes materialism, creating a culture of consumerism and excess that can lead to a focus on acquiring material possessions rather than cultivating meaningful relationships and experiences (Mina, 2021). Since influencers base a lot of their content on relatability and approachability, the lifestyle they portray on social media can seem desirable to many, often with the message that these products are essential to achieving the perfect life. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem among followers who feel pressure to conform to these standards (Choudhary & Dhawan, 2020). The consumers are trying to keep up with the evolving trends coming at them with blinding speed. Many young influencers showcase the things they have achieved in a short span of time on their platforms: a luxury car, a self-financed house, international trips etc. Since the relatability factor with influencers is high, and their lifestyle seems just within reach, this creates an anxiety in their followers which is relievable only by purchase or achievement of these aspirational goals. Many followers have also reported increased dissatisfaction with their lives, jobs, vacations and possessions when they see influencers get the best of resources and opportunities. 76% of participants in a survey believed that their wardrobes have significantly expanded after they started following trends and fashion influencers on social media.

Influencers promoted and encouraged 'Thrifting', a seemingly affordable and sustainable way of buying secondhand clothes. In a short span of time, hauls and shopping videos from fast fashion brands and thrift destinations became staple fashion content, normalizing owning more and frequent purchasing, which is unhealthy for both individuals and the planet (Ghosh & Mishra, 2021). Sarojini Nagar is a flea market in Delhi, India where consumers can buy trendy clothing at extremely affordable prices. Prices are as low as INR 25 per item. Since the explosion of 'thrifting', India has seen a fair share of fashion influencers building a trendy

wardrobe on a budget. These influencers make content about the hauls they get from flea markets like Sarojini, due to which the market has shot into popularity as a destination to acquire pocket friendly, trendy clothes. An Instagram fashion influencer travelled to Sarojini Nagar and returned to her hometown in Bangalore with 3 suitcases filled with clothing sourced from the market. Trendy clothing is readily available in Sarojini because business owners employ seamstresses paying them as low as INR 1.50 per cloth. The Print spoke to 3 women, who make INR 500 per day for cutting over 300 clothes in 12-hour long shifts. Studies have shown that sweatshop employees face a myriad of health conditions including breathing difficulties and chronic joint pain. Even the trade surplus sold in the market is often illegally sourced through Bangladesh.

The COVID-19 pandemic saw the rise of the concept of 'workcation'. After the 1st lockdown when the restrictions were eased in the nation, many influencers moved to places like Bir (Himanchal Pradesh) and Goa and also encouraged their followers to work from the mountains and beaches. This aspiration was easily accessible to young Indian population, many of whom started renting places in destinations like Bir and Goa. From 2019 to presently in 2023, this gentrification has caused the rent these places to almost triple, making housing unaffordable and inaccessible to the local population who do not have the disposable income to spare on sky high rents. Renting a house is Goa, is as expensive as renting a house in South Delhi.

The grim conditions of flea market sweatshops and cultural ecosystems are exacerbated as these destinations come into popular consciousness through influencers' reach. It can be argued that when influencers display content, it should fall within their ambit of responsibility to convey all sides of the aspirational lifestyle - the good, the bad and the ugly.

Conclusion

The rise of influencer culture and its commercialization can be attributed to the emotional connections that influencers are able to create with their followers, which contributes to their influence. This is what made influencer marketing so effective and targeted. Moreover, an influencer's platform has a mix of personal and professional content, making it difficult to discern whether their influence is stemming from proven domain credibility or personal likeability.

With the gradual erosion of boundaries between influencers and their platforms, this problem is further exacerbated, especially in the context of the Indian market which places a strong emphasis on trust and value-consciousness. The re-

liability that consumers once ascribed to industry professionals is now extended to influencers with social capital and/or a platform, leading to deep distrust of influencer marketing, rampant spread of misinformation, grave mental health concerns for the influencer and the influenced, and promotion of excessive materialism with significant socio-cultural costs.

Influencers and brands are facing questions about how to establish and maintain credibility in a digital environment where personal and professional personas are closely intertwined. For consumers, this warrants a deeper exploration of various factors that can influence their choices and decisions, and a re-evaluation of their relationship with content and its creators – because influence does not necessarily imply reliability and ease of access doesn't entitle one to intimacy.

The rise of social media influencing in India makes it crucial to address these concerns. It is the collective responsibility of not just influencers but also brands, agencies, regulators, and consumers to ensure transparency in this ecosystem and to bring balance to this discourse.

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CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

BEING BADASS AND THE SASSY HINDU *NAARI*: CASTE AND THE MAKING OF POPULAR FEMINISM IN INDIA

Vaishnavi Kollimarla
kolli099@umn.edu
MA/PhD Candidate, Department of Theatre Arts and Dance, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

The paper explores the stakes of popular feminism in India as it interacts with the everyday realities of gender, caste, and class. Further, it critically explores how popular feminism is strategically employing the politics of race and caste, to meet its needs. The paper focuses on the politics of hyper (in)visibilization by popular feminism as a means to run a rather violent project of perpetuating structural forms of violence under the disguise of "sassy feminism." The paper employs performance and content analysis of a popular feminist Instagram page called bebadass.in for this purpose.

Introduction

In India, there has been a recent rise of "unapologetically" feminist pages, particularly on Instagram. This surge could be read in conversation with the politics of popular feminism, postfeminism, and neoliberal feminism across the globe. The paper will expand the scope of understanding 'popular feminism' (otherwise dominated by white feminist scholarship) by exploring its messy unfolding in India as

it interacts with its complex social realities. I will undertake this process through performance and content analysis of an Instagram page called 'Bebadass.in'. For this paper, I focus on a few posts of the page to shed light on the politics behind the larger patterns of hyper-(in)visibilizing performances of some identities over others. I argue that the performance of 'feminism' by the page is seeped into the politics of caste, along with strategically employing and appropriating the politics of race to advance the power of oppressive institutions, rather than challenging them.

What is 'Popular feminism'?

Popular feminism, as Banet Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017) argue refers to the existence of a "market-based production and reproduction of a feminist politics... that seems to explicitly recognize that inequality exists while stopping short of recognizing, naming, or disrupting the political-economic conditions that allow that inequality to be profitable" (886). Whereas, postfeminism is engaged with the undoing of feminism, it celebrates a gendered "freedom" in which women are free to choose what they want to become (McRobbie, 2004). Neoliberal feminism, on another side, clearly avows gender inequality "to spawn a new feminist subject, one who accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care" (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, 7). With these hyper-individualizing feminisms, all three phenomena work together to "promote "happiness" and "go-getting" rather than justice or liberation as the end or aim." (Dosekun 2020, 144).

Performing popular feminism by Instagram pages?

Before diving deeper into the analysis of Bebadass.in page, I would like to invite us to engage with some questions that are central to the arguments I made in this paper, such as: How can Instagram pages perform feminism? What does it mean for non-human elements (such as various kinds of digital infrastructures) to perform politics? Performance studies scholar Richard Schechner (2006) wrote, "[a]ny behavior, event, action, or thing can be studied 'as' performance" (40). In this sense, performance studies explores bodies, identities, events, and narratives in terms of "the myriad ways in which meaning is created and social life is shaped" (Pearson & Shanks 2001, xiii). Leekar et al. using Barad's (2003) work write:

Contemporary technological apparatuses and media provoke new forms of 'intra-action' between what is usually considered to be either human or machinic agency, to use Barad's terminology of posthumanist performativity (Barad 2003). In this sense, digital cultures are performative cultures. They condition and are

shaped by techno-social processes and agencies, and they afford new possibilities for performative practices and interventions. It follows that the study of performativity in its heterogeneous dimensions cannot afford to ignore the agential forces and effects of digital technologies and their entanglements with human bodies. They assert the need to rethink 'performance' and 'performativity' to include the 'performances' by non-human elements as well, to argue that "digital devices and infrastructures perform, and they make humans (and non-humans) perform" (Leekar et al. 2017, 11).

In this sense, the popular feminist pages such as Bebadass.in with the affordances of the platform of Instagram (in this case), interact with humans (with their own politics and sensibilities) to hyper(in)visiblize the performance of some identities over others, in ways that conform to the neoliberal, caste-based order. In other words, the 'page' as a digital object performs politics in a way that enables the strengthening of larger systems of power.

BeBadass.in, "Empowering women with a dose of sass"

The page Bebadass.in actively curates "feminist" content that is dominantly being created by influencers from Western countries (including the Indian diaspora), which could talk to the issues that 'Indian' women face. Through this, the page performs a brand of feminism, one in which being empowered is inflected by the centrality of being sassy or badass. The content and curation of the page, rather than engaging with the issues of the women it aims to cater to, advances an aspiration for the women to work towards, to be 'empowered'. This aspiration is marked with a certain sense of fashion, a seemingly nonchalant-effortless style in appearance, being youthful, and exuding 'sass' in one's prompt comebacks to patriarchy. I draw attention to the normalized oppressive caste and gender-based politics in this sense of "fashion" and "sass".

Popular feminism functions through a presentation of the crisis of inequality. It then engages with the neoliberal culture to create a 'market for empowerment.' Bebadass.in presents this "crisis", as elucidated by Nikita Dixit (founder of the page) in her interview, in the apparent 'lack of information that women could access about issues that concern them.' Through this assertion of a crisis, it creates a market of content for empowerment aiming to address this crisis. I argue that for popular feminism to operate in the context of India, it needs to perpetuate and uphold brahminical structures of power. This perpetuation is advanced through a strategy of hyper-inviblizing the discourse of caste by the page, which is made to

happen by hyper-visiblizing or creating an 'Indian' identity (in this case an Indian woman/femme identity) marked by the markers of Brahminical patriarchy.

The making of the sassy/badass "Hindu Naari"

To begin with this unpacking, let's understand what being 'sassy' or 'badass' means. The use of the term 'badass' since the 1950s has been associated with the figure of the 'badass nigger' which was introduced as "the black man who refuses to meekly submit to white society" (Shiedlower, 2017). Whereas, the word sassy emerged as a variation on saucy, from the idea that words can be zesty, sharp, or spicy. Bebadass.in seems to draw its sassiness by engaging with templates of clapbacks; a powerful rhetorical tool used by Black women, that denote a quick-witted, direct rebuttal of an insult or aggression, typically in social media exchanges (Washington, 2021). Citing Jacuinde (2019), Washington elaborates that "the rebuke or clapback aims to renegotiate social relationships by setting the offender straight or putting them in their place" (364). Hence, sass could be connected to this rhetorical tool of clapback as well as with badassery, as a way of challenging authorities that might appear rude to people in power.

The performance of this 'sass' or 'badassery' could be seen through a recent post by the Bebadass.in page, an illustration by a young urban artist based out of India, Divya Soni (@ilyustrate) (See Figure 17.0.1). The post is a digital portrait of a young Hindu woman. The portrait could be seen as an example of a postfeminist embodiment of Hindu femininity. Drawn against a pale green background, the woman looks towards the viewers with her large kohled eyes. As she wears a pallu covering her head, she is not coy or shy, as is stereotypically expected from women. The use of colors and sequins highlights her embracing femininity. Despite an obsession with fair skin tones in India, the markedness of the brown skin color is crucial to note here. The style of wearing the pallu by covering her head, the rich fabric material, the embroidery, and the jewelry are markers of her dominant caste status. A part of her hand is visible in the picture that shows a middle finger to the viewers. A dialogue box reads "Adjust, Compromise, Sacrifice. That's how it works." As a comeback, her response reads "No."

Whereas, the choice of 'browning' her skin highlights the desire to be connected with the flows of the global 'brown' girl category (Rao, 2022), the spectacular embracing of a dominant caste hindu femininity can be seen as an embodiment of a distinct form of postfeminist sensibility, marked by a "gendered confidence."

This spectacular embracing of dominant caste hindu femininity can be observed across different examples on this page, as well as on others. For instance,

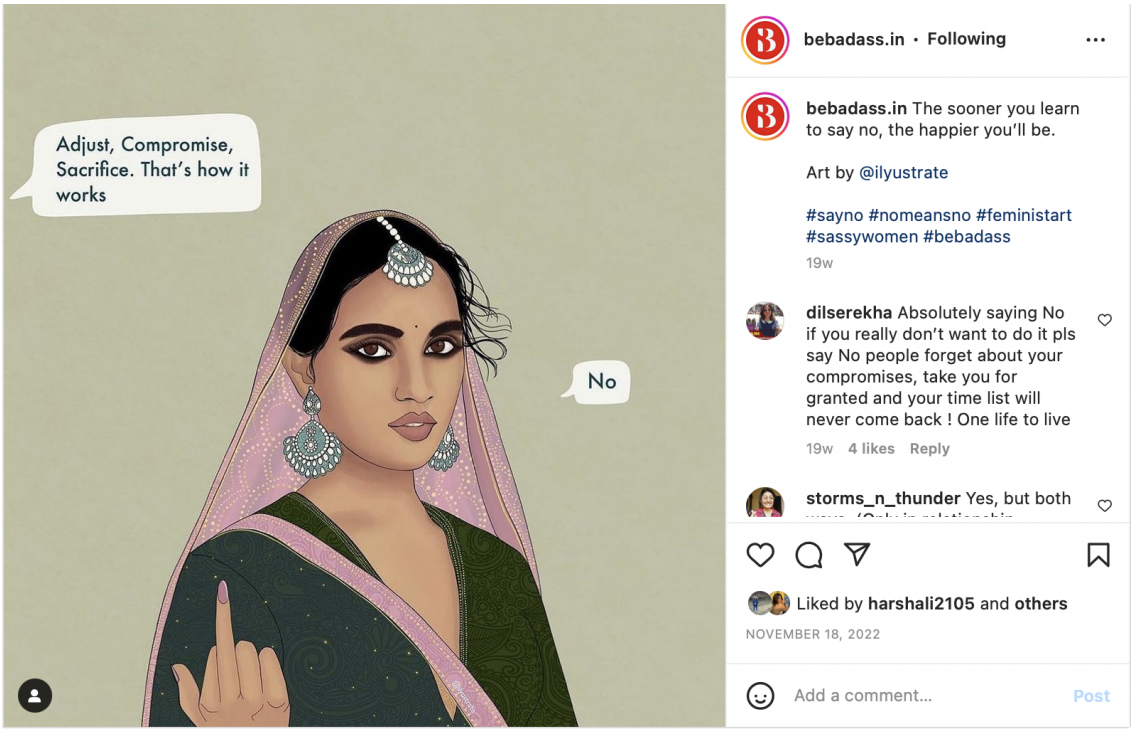

Figure 17.0.1: The sassy Hindu Naari

a recent post by the page (see figure 17.0.2) prompts its audience to share that they are a "Desi daughter", "without telling us you're a desi daughter". This recent trend on social media encourages people to share through objects, pictures, and memories about a particular identity without necessarily using 'words' but symbols of various kinds. The interesting choice of Bollywood film actor Deepika Padukone's character that belongs to a rajput caste in the controversial film *Paadmavat*, again speaks to my argument. In addition to using a picture in which a woman is dressed according to the norms of caste as symbolic of 'desi daughter', it is also interesting to think about this choice of using this picture (of this particular character) despite the caste and gender-based debates that became extremely popular before the release of the film.[1] Similarly, another post (see figure 17.0.3), inspired by the Bollywood actress Rekha, presents yet another case for an embracing of a distinct postfeminist embodiment of hindu femininity. The woman is adorned with Jewellery, flowers, and expensive silk robes. Similar to figure 17.0.1, this portrait also highlights the brown skin tone, resistance to the stereotypical expectation of being coy or shy associated with such an attire, and answering back

[1]See 'Padmavati's Kin: A Conflict without Contradictions' by Pushpendra Johar to understand the caste-based politics behind Deepika Padukone's character, https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/padmavati-s-kin-a-conflict-without-contradictions/, See 'The deafening silence of feminists in the Padmavati fracas' by Deeksha Bharadwaj to read more about the controversy and the silence around it, https://theprint.in/opinion/silence-feminists-padmavati-fracas/17177/.

Figure 17.0.2: The Desi daughter

to society's expectations, with the expression "Urgh..." as a response to the lines "Desi parents will say 'you haven't seen the world, and won't let you see the world as well" (translated). However, in contrast, to figure 17.0.1, her lack of interest in caring or engaging with the 'society' is performed by the act of looking away from the audience, instead of at them. Her disengagement can be read as an 'insult or aggression' towards the authority (as expanded in the work of Washington, 2021), which forms the sassiness or badassery in this case.

Whereas in figure 17.0.1, the utterance of the word "No" is performative of sassy feminism due to its quick-witted, monosyllabic reply (like a clapback performance). These performances when read in juxtaposition with the postfeminist embodiment of Hindu femininity, create an effect of being badass. However, these performances of sass limit themselves to establishing that "feminism is having a moment." (Banet Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017, 885).

Rather than engaging with the murky terrains and violence that accompanies when one says no, or insults the patriarchal authorities, the page signals that one could be empowered/ 'become a feminist' simply by the utterance of the word or an expression. The "act of saying no" or insulting then is an end, and the means are unnecessary to be discussed. Therefore, this brand of feminism makes feminism into a list of seemingly achievable things, "happy objects" as articulated

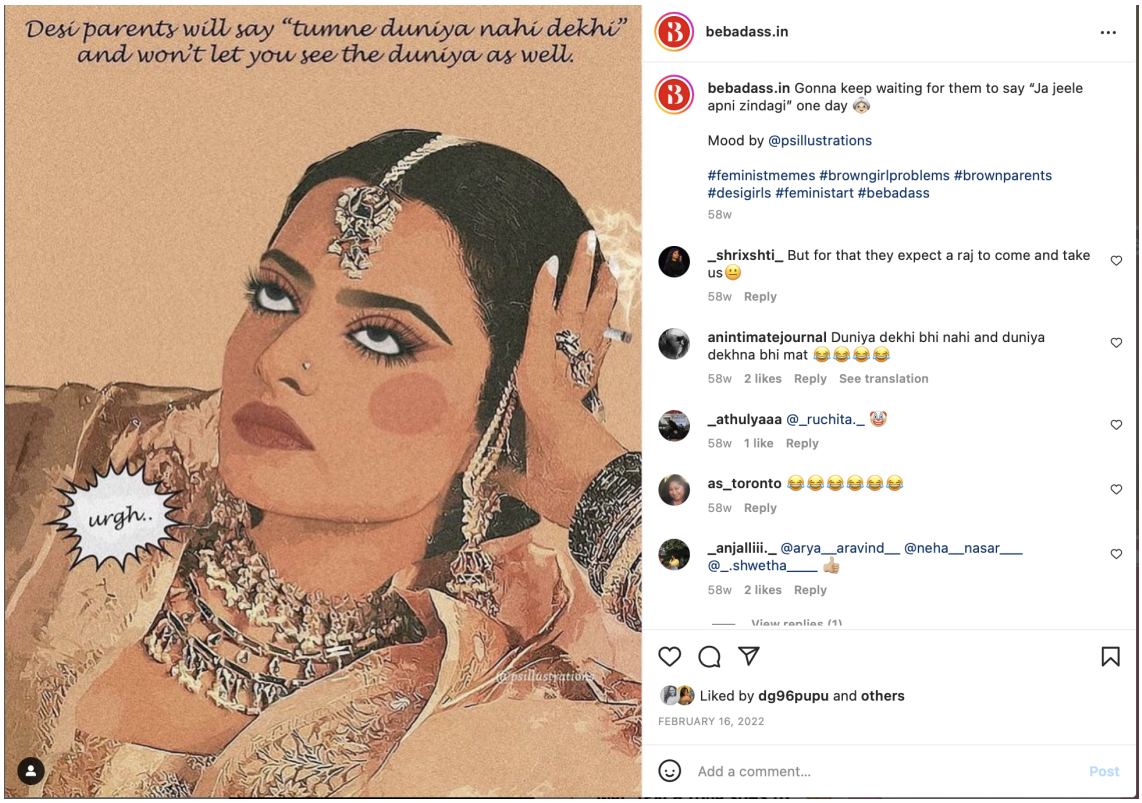

Figure 17.0.3: Sass through insult by not caring

by Sara Ahmed (2010). In the case of the first post then, the page makes "saying no" into a happy object, where through the post, its audience is being suggested that to be empowered it is crucial to find your path towards this happy object. In addition, to move towards the happy object of "saying no", it is also crucial for the audience "to inhabit the right bodies" (Ahmed 2010, 34). As "we have to work on the body such that the body's immediate reactions, how we sense the world and make sense of the world, take us in the "right" direction"(ibid), the posts suggest that the right bodies to inhabit to be able to find happiness are essentially and reductively that of the dominant caste Hindu woman.

The risks and profits of rebelling

As popular feminists performatively challenge inequalities, they still garner hostile and violent responses from patriarchal forces. Despite this, why does bebadass.in being the 'happy feminist' page, attempt to question the systems of power by making the "aadarsh hindu naari" (ideal Hindu woman) trope, speak back? Such apparent risks that the page takes are crucial for visibility as Instagram "propagates and rewards images which display and validate neoliberal ideals and constructions of femininity" (Mahoney 2022, 522). Additionally, the page collaborates

with other neoliberal entrepreneurial projects to accumulate capital by extracting profits from the systems of inequalities that they perform to fight against/invisiblize.

As postfeminism "hails and welcomes into its fold diverse and distanciated subjects who have the material, discursive, and imaginative capital to buy into it" (Dosekun 2020, 14), the markers of Hindu femininity which pass as "Indian-ness" play a crucial role here. The postfeminist embodiment of Hindu femininity becomes the diverse and distanciated object/subject; subjects who can purchase and embody the required material capital to be a feminist. By using such images, at one end the page conforms to the diktats of the algorithm and on the other end, the seemingly confrontational nature of the post brings about conflict, hence more engagement. Therefore, these small risks feed into making the post (and the page) grow in the economy of visibility.

Caste, "Indian-ness" and violence in the popular feminist pages

The hyper-visiblization of certain kinds of normative "Indian-ness", as highlighted in the paper, by these pages marked and mandated by the politics of the Hindu caste system, needs to be read with the hyper-invisiblization of caste-based violence by pages like these. Sima Shakhsari (2020), in the context of queer people in Iran, asserts that the hypervisibility of some identities over others is implicated in the "biopolitical, ethicopolitical, and necropolitical practices that underlie the division of populations into those who are exceptionally deserving of life... and those who are deemed killable" (164). Drawing from their work, I argue that the hyper-invisiblization of caste-based violence and popular feminism's distancing of itself from the discourse of caste is a strategic act in this direction. The hyper-visiblization of demands for justice by some (dominant castes) exists along with the deadly silence on the ever-rising caste violence and its systematic erasure in public discourses and memory.

I take this opportunity to highlight this dangerous phenomenon using some examples. As discussed initially in the paper, the page locates the crisis through which it creates its market by creating and curating content to address the 'lack of information that women could access about issues that concern them'. Therefore, the page constantly posts in response to the various forms of violence that gain attention in popular news media outlets. At the beginning of this year, multiple cases of violence against women populated the headlines of the news in India. The page covered the news of violence against women in metropolitan spaces that

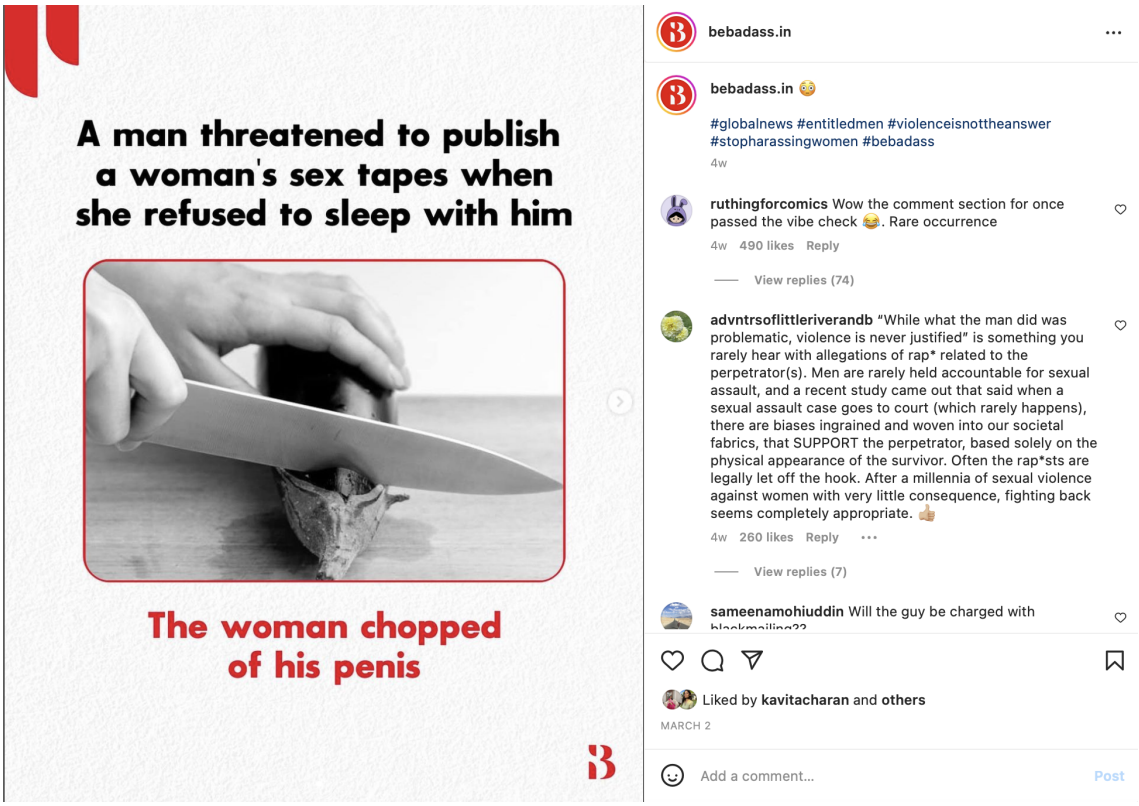

Figure 17.0.4

are dominated by oppressed caste women through different posts as the news was shared in the media (from men harassing women by climbing walls of Miranda House College in Delhi University to the violence and murder of women in live-in relationships) within hours of the stories' release. However, any form of violence against Dalit, Bahujan, or Adivasi women is not shared in any format at all. Building on this, on 2nd March 2023, the news of an Indian court acquitting upper caste men accused of raping a young dalit woman in Hathras broke in the media. The following posts (see figures 17.0.4, 17.0.5 and 17.0.6) were shared that day by the Bebadass.in page: By sharing this, I do not mean to undermine or diminish the issue of Violence Against Women and Queer folx, or issues around body positivity, in general. Rather, I want to highlight how the popular feminist pages mark the lives that are "deemed killable" through their hyper-invisiblization of some identities, stories, and narratives. Therefore, behind the happy projects of popular feminism on social media, enmeshed with the economics and politics of visibility, collaborations, and content creation and curation; are deaths, massacres, and dehumanization of the most oppressed communities.

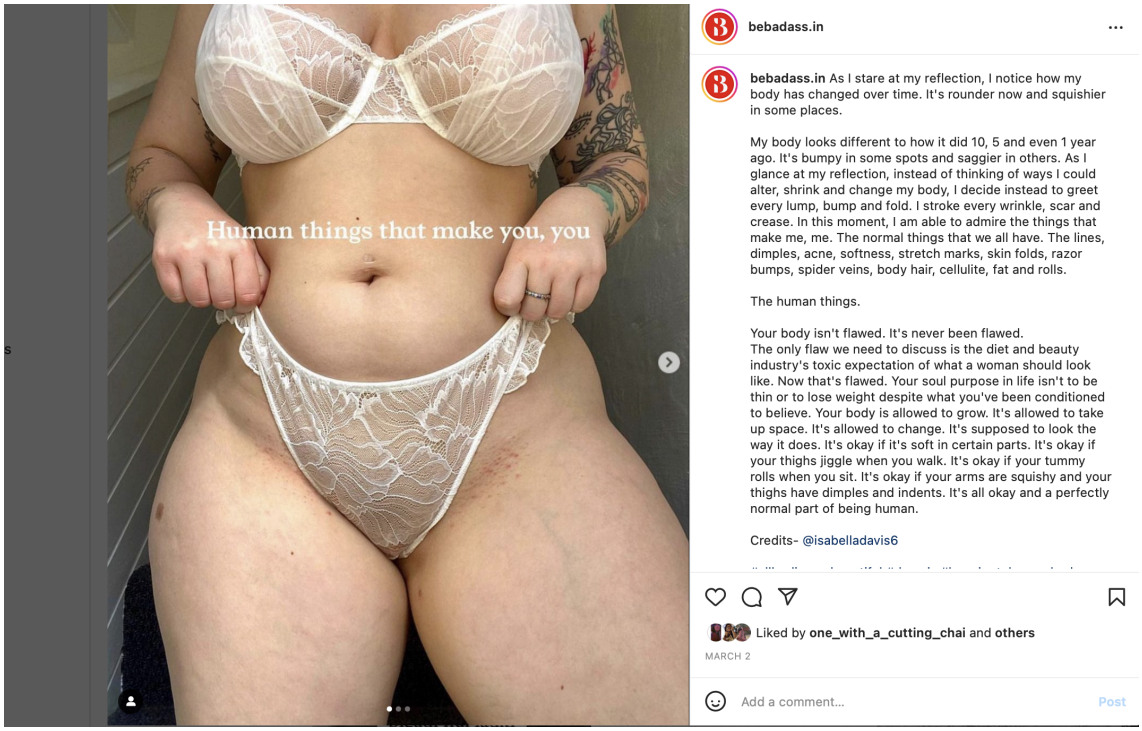

Figure 17.0.5

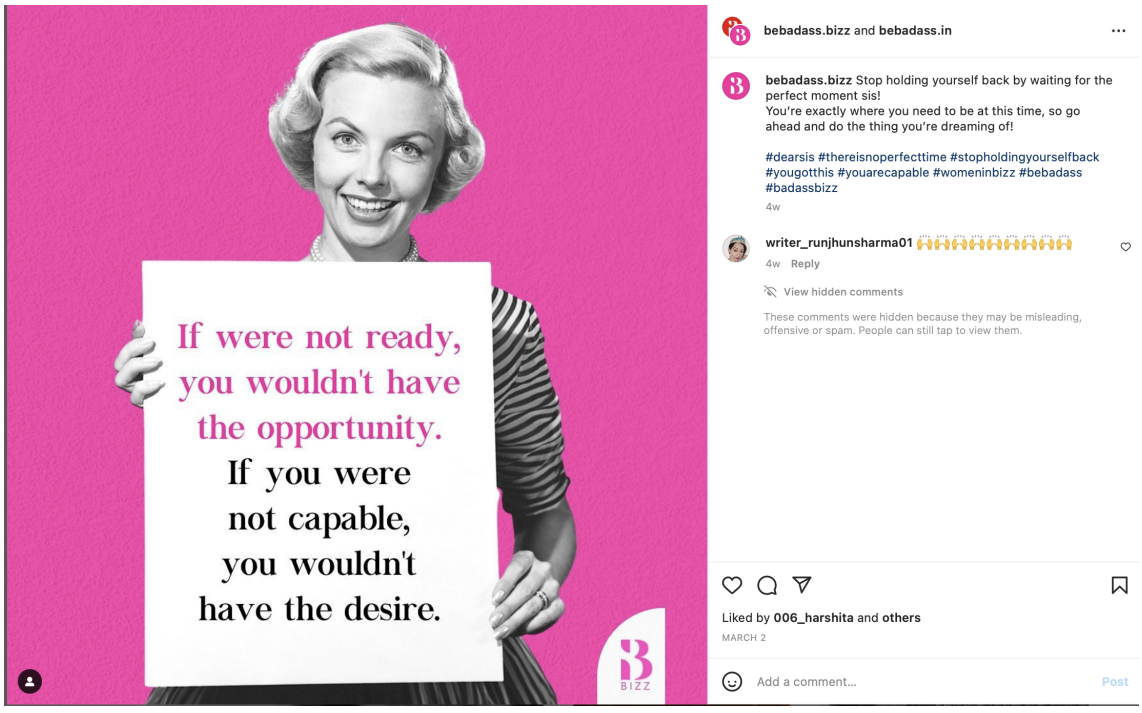

Figure 17.0.6

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CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

INFLUENCE AS METHOD AND METHOD AS INFLUENCE: COLLABORATIVE PLATFORM WORK IN MUMBAI AND DELHI

Isha Bhallamudi
isha.b@uci.edu
University of California Irvine

Lakshita Malik
lmalik3@uic.edu
University of Illinois Chicago

In this position paper, the authors discuss the collaborative influencing practices of women beauticians operating online and offline in Mumbai and Delhi, through the lens of the authors' engagements with them as researchers and collaborators. The authors focus on how these beauticians skillfully develop and translate offline networking habits and connections into online engagement on platforms, through a high and continuous level of hidden cognitive labor. The authors reflect on methodological interventions they made to understand the influencing worlds of women beauticians that remain hard to access within biased platform logics. The authors ask: What does it mean to be present in the entangled lives of our interlocutors, not as flies on the wall but as our multiple selves that are called on at different times to co-create the worlds we are supposedly studying?

Introduction

"Aap apna number dedo mujhe" ("you should give your number to me") was a phrase we both heard as we made our way through the fragmented communities of women beauticians working in Delhi and Mumbai. The exchange of phone numbers and social media information (Instagram handles) emerged as the hidden yet foundational labor for beauticians using digital platforms like Yes Madam, Urban Company and Be U. These platforms promised to "organize" a formerly "unorganized" beauty labor being performed in the narrow bylanes of cities across India. However, the predatory practices of these platforms have resulted in an industrial reserve army [5, 8] of beauty gig-workers waiting for stable sources of income. While these companies promise social capital to the (largely women) workers, they frequently and by design fail to keep the costs and value of labor low [1, 8].

In this position paper, we discuss the collaborative influencing practices of women beauticians in Mumbai and Delhi through the lens of our own engagements with them as researchers and collaborators, showing how they skillfully translate "offline" networking habits and connections into "online" platforms. Through continuous and intense hidden labor, they build their brand, leverage networking opportunities, and cultivate a customer base. We discuss these findings by way of our reflections on the methodologies we used to understand influencing worlds of women beauticians that remain hard to access within racialized platform logics [1, 6].

Method

IB: I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation, with women gig workers in the beauty industry in Mumbai. Over 9 months between April 2022 - April 2023, I accompanied beauticians during their workday, spent time in various platform offices, "modeled" for gig worker trainings and exams in the office, and spoke to beauticians seeking to start their own platforms or small businesses. With 2 interlocutors, I purchased a shared membership on a local platform and we took turns to manage the app, follow up on leads and negotiate with customers.

LM: I conducted in-person and digital ethnography with beauty workers (makeup artists and beauticians) between May 2021 and August 2022. The in-person fieldwork was conducted in New Delhi through a use of semi-structured interviews and participant observation. I followed my interlocutors into the multiple worlds to which they invited me: attending bridal makeup sessions and going

shopping with interlocutors.

Method as Influence: The Hidden, Collaborative Labor of Influencing

The material evidence of influencing is typically sought in visible forms of engagement (comments, likes, shares, remixes) and a focus on quantity (the more engagement the better). However, here we focus on the category of women beauticians [1, 7, 8] who create markets of consumers themselves rather than relying on pre-established categories of legacy consumers. In market regimes designed to fail them, these women do the labor of building social capital and extending the scope of the beauty market itself. This labor is deeply feminized, invisible and hidden as it does not and may not directly manifest as increased engagement metrics on social media, yet it is foundational to the creation, reproduction and expansion of beauty platforms and markets.

This work involves high and continuous amounts of skilled cognitive labor. First, in remembering and maintaining a detailed mental roster of the hundreds of contacts that are collected. Second, in strategically keeping up and following up with contacts based on need and opportunity - such as painstakingly working to cultivate "repeat" customers on WhatsApp, and connecting with industry professionals on Instagram to collaborate and expand their professional horizons. Third, in carefully managing appearance, tone and language, and utilizing the latest trends in these interactions to maximize the sharing or receiving of influence.

Influence as Method: Reflections on Positionality

We have indicated that these worlds of micro-influencing are not only situated in physical locations but across several platforms (Instagram, WhatsApp). These worlds would have remained invisible to us had we not seriously engaged with the mixed realities of our interlocutors. When and why were we folded into the social/market networks? As dominant caste, middle-class women working with US based institutions, we are not neutral observers but imbued with familiarity (and differential power) and hence held the potential for being part of these beauty workers' customer base. How were/are we situated in these networks of micro-influencing? Our time in the "field" in Delhi and Mumbai frequently turned into experimentations with beauty treatments that were not part of our existing beauty routines at the time. Experimenting with nail art, specialized skin care and beauty treatments became a site of socializing and spending time with interlocutors who

often were pressed for time.

We were being called on to share our capital, not only to be influenced, but also to influence by spreading "word of mouth" about the women we were working with. A statement like *"aap apna number dedo mujhe"* has a material afterlife that lives in anxieties and excitement around potentials of gaining (social) capital. We are not suggesting that these social connections are purely transactional. In fact, it is precisely because intimacy of any kind cannot be separated from economic transaction [3, 10] that methodological approaches to studying these interactions must also be muddy. The intersections between the online and offline worlds animate the relationship between us and our interlocutors. Our social media following, presentation, positioning is not "outside" the scope of understanding these relationships and the labor our interlocutors perform. Understanding the cognitive/organizational labor that our interlocutors perform, sometimes to generate clients out of thin air, requires speaking about and with our positionality vis-a-vis our interlocutors.

Possibilities: People as Platform Infrastructure

Our attempt in this position paper is not to provide neat findings that have a clear place in existing academic discourses. Through our paper we call attention to the inherently messy logics of platform capitalism, and understanding modes of thinking and being, as in conflict with the algorithm which exacerbates narrow identities and allows us to curate our experiences in specific ways [2]. Our foray into micro-influencing was accidental, hinged on our continuous presence in the physical lives of our interlocutors. What might this accidental ethnographic engagement with micro-influencing, built across the user-interfaces of several different platforms and bodies, mean for understanding the cyborg realities (Haraway 1985) we inhabit?

Acknowledgement

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CHAPTER

NINETEEN

#BOYCOTTBOLLYWOOD: CAMOUFLAGING MISOGYNY AND ISLAMOPHOBIA IN A MOVEMENT

Sheyril Agarwal
sheyril.agarwal321@gmail.com
BITS Pilani, Hyderabad

Social media, particularly Twitter, have emerged as a powerful tool to organize online campaigns. As an online protest gains momentum and amasses fringe communities, it often loses its initial intent. This case can be made for the #BoycottBollywood movement, which was set up with the motive of criticizing Bollywood on its output quality and the prevalence of nepotism, but has evolved over time to be shrouded in misogyny and Islamophobia. This paper analyzes how discourse around #BoycottBollywood has developed over time and focuses on the use of #BoycottPathaan to highlight the overwhelmingly anti-Muslim and misogynistic themes that run within the movement.

Introduction and Background

In recent times, an online campaign has emerged on Twitter in an effort to boycott films coming out of the mainstream Hindi cinema industry, popularly known as Bollywood. On account of sustained and coordinated attacks prior to the release of films, there has been a great deal of speculation on whether such campaigns can actually impact the decades old film industry. The movement has also managed

to garner responses from prominent bollywood actors and actresses [1] [2].

The movement was initially presented as an argument against nepotism, with the major part of discourse being centered around biases in the film industry and it's alleged decline in quality. In this paper, I show that the actual drivers of this movement are Islamophobia and misogyny. I explore how the narrative has shifted over the course of the campaign's most active period, the forms in which certain themes emerge and how members of the community engage with these themes.

Data and Methods

I used two seed hashtags to build the dataset. "#BoycottBollywood" was used to capture the general discourse around boycotting the Hindi film industry. This data was used to identify trends in tweeting and changes in narrative. The second seed hashtag, "#BoycottPathaan" was used to collect data that exposed the anti-Muslim and misogynistic themes in the movement.

Data was then collected by using the full archive search point provided by the Twitter API. August 1, 2022 was chosen as the starting date for data collection owing to campaigns against the major box office releases in the months that followed. The data collection was concluded on January 17, 2023 in order to record activity related to the film Pathaan, which faced substantial backlash from the boycott community.

It was found that 261,586 accounts had at least once used these hashtags. This yielded a total of 2,578,256 tweets, of which 413,082 were original tweets, while the remainder were retweets, quoted tweets or replies to tweets from the original set.

To track changes in discourse, a list of keywords were prepared to capture posts revolving around Nepotism, Islam and Hinduism. This involved manually scanning through a keyword frequency list and picking out commonly used words and grouping them.

[1] `https://www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/kareena-kapoor-reacts-to-boycott-bollywood-trend-at-kolkata-event-101674480874528.html`.

[2] `https://www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/suniel-shetty-urges-yogi-adityanath-to-help-end-boycott-bollywood-trends-101672933277889.html`.

Organising the Movement

Release Attacks

I plotted the daily post frequency for all the tweets and retweets in the dataset and annotated the peaks in the plot (see Figure 1). Most peaks are accounted for by mapping them to relevant events and looking at the tweet content for that day[3].

The majority of attacks are timed around the releases of new films. This makes sense from a virality perspective because the film is newsworthy and is reflected in which films get attacked. We see that bigger budget films like Brahmastra, Laal Singh Chaddha, and Raksha Bandhan get more sustained attacks than relatively smaller budget films Darlings and Dobaara, which undergo comparatively shorter attacks.

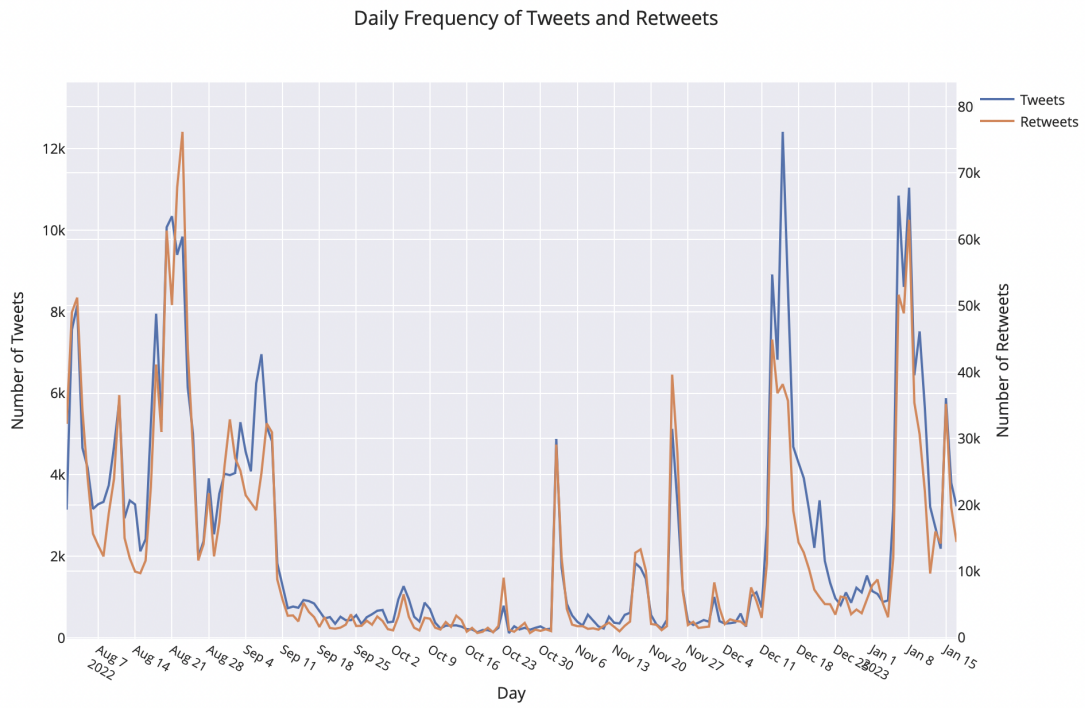

Figure 19.0.1: Daily timeline of the number of #BoycottBollywood Tweets and Retweets

Influencers and Ghost Accounts

A look into the user community reveals two contrasting groups of accounts that work together to push anti-Bollywood content. First group consisting of high

[3] `https://plotly.com/~sheyril/85/`

influence accounts, and the second group being formed by what are characterised as ghost users.

I use the retweet network to identify influential accounts in the dataset. These accounts can be used to recognise who the key drivers of narrative within the community are. To narrow down the set of users, two thresholds are applied. First, I only consider users that have been retweeted more than 50 times in the sample. Second, I only consider edges where a user has retweeted another user more than two times. Then, using eigenvector centrality, the top 30 users that play a crucial role in the flow of information in the #BoycottBollywood community were identified.

A manual inspection of the set of 30 influential users showed that most users in this set were "SSRians" [1,4] and the second largest set consisted of accounts identified as right wing influencers.

We found that a significant proportion of the accounts that tweeted the #BoycottBollywood hashtag were in fact ghost accounts with no social media following. A total of 12,889 out of the total accounts that at least once used the hashtag had 0 followers. This suggests collusive behavior, since an account with no followers has no real incentive to flood social media with messaging. A look at their date of account creation shows that these accounts were created in the last two years, with a sudden spike in August 2022 [4].

Propaganda in Tweets

A frequently asked question is whether Boycott Bollywood is part of a broader propaganda in terms of its structure and intended targets. Fig. 19.0.2 gives some insight into how the major themes of discourse have changed based on how often they appear in a week. While discourse around the film industry and their depictions of Hinduism has been prominent since the beginning, a clear shift in focus away from nepotism is apparent from the visualisation.

Since the period in which this shift occurs coincides with the time boycotting efforts were directed towards Pathaan, the question of whether the attempts to Boycott Pathaan were even more specifically galvanized around Shah Rukh Khan's Muslim identity arises. To examine this, I explored the sub-themes in messaging about #BoycottPathaan that went viral, using a high retweet count as an indicator of virality.

I manually coded two collections of tweets: 200 most retweeted tweets and a random sample of 200 original tweets. To detect the different kinds of agendas,

[4] `https://plotly.com/~sheyril/61/`

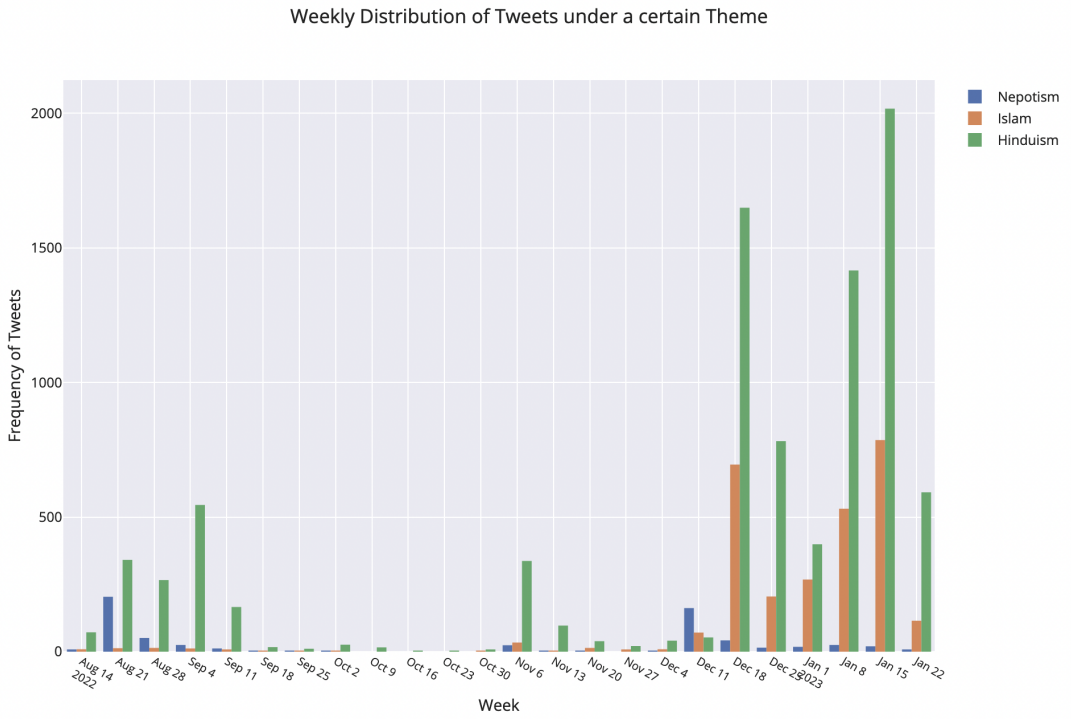

Figure 19.0.2: Weekly frequency of Tweets based on different narratives in the Boycott Bollywood movement

Category	Subcategory	High RTs	Random	Total
Nationalism and Culture		42	16	58
Individual Attack		69	33	102
Misogyny		32	21	53
SSR related		33	22	55

Table 19.0.1: Summary of categorical coding done on a highly retweeted set of tweets and a random sample

I make use of 5 categories. Since a tweet can have overlapping themes, these categories are non-exclusive.

Findings show that subcategories that have thematic intersections with a second area of interest are much more likely to make a tweet about Boycott Pathaan go viral. Inter-sectional propaganda, defined as having a second line of conceptual framing that aligns with a propagated partisan position in the public discourse. Thus, a notion of Muslims as incompatible with the idea of patriotic sensibility for India could be an example of such partisan positions, and would be considered propaganda, as it is typically propagated through networks via methods of coordinated messaging.

Additionally, it was found that propagandist content is much more "effective" in terms of numerical outreach. This is reflected in the highly retweeted set where 82.5% tweets identified as propaganda, as compared to the random sample in which

Figure 19.0.3: Sample of tweets related to anti-Muslim messaging

46.5% of tweets qualified for the same, and we find this result to be significant (T-test, $P < 0.05$). So, the first conclusion here is that at the top end of the spectrum, i.e. the most retweeted messages about Pathaan, some co-located element of intersectional propaganda is more likely to be present.

While lower toxicity and propaganda in the random sample can be partly explained by unrelated tweets, it is evident that toxic content generates more reaction from users. I verify this by comparing engagement metrics like likes, retweets, quotes and replies between toxic and non-toxic tweets for the combined sample of 400 tweets.

To do so, I ran a T test to check whether there was a significant difference in engagement when the tweet contained inflammatory content. There is a significant increase across all metrics in cases where we detected some kind of toxic content. Additionally, on average, toxic tweets receive twice as many likes and retweets as compared to non-toxic tweets.

Use of Anti-Muslim Rhetoric

We see in Table 19.0.1 that Religion and Nationalism are the two overwhelmingly large categories of intersection. The basic argument for the Boycott Pathaan messaging is either to attack one of the core characters for their religion (i.e, Shahrukh Khan as a Muslim) or to present the overall idea of patronizing the film as anti-Hindu (see Fig. 19.0.3).

An important construct within nationalism is the notion of culture, and by extension, a definition of what is legitimate and illegitimate culture [2,5]. We find that language is an important element of culture – thus the term "Urduwood" is

Figure 19.0.4: Sample of tweets trolling actress Deepika Padukone

frequently used, suggesting that Urdu speakers are by definition culturally incompatible with India. Interestingly, in the last several years, the use of Urdu script to introduce a Hindi film has declined dramatically, suggesting that filmmakers want to avoid ruffling feathers on this issue.

Misogynistic Themes

The second related element of cultural exclusion is the use of misogyny. The use of misogyny is in and of itself used as a means of suggesting cultural incompatibility, especially with an abstract notion of Indian tradition.

We see two major channels of misogyny here. One, that is directed towards Deepika Padukone, the lead actress in Pathaan who was excessively trolled for her appearance in the song "Besharam Rang" (see Fig. 19.0.4).

Out of the 134,953 tweets that use #BoycottPathaan, we select 12,636 tweets that make a direct reference to the actress in their text. Next, we generate a list of most common words used in tweet text and filter out words pertaining to body shaming and moral policing. We then divide these keywords into categories to capture 3 main themes:

- Body/Slut Shaming: bikini, body, nudity, clothes, softp0rn, porn
- Insults: cheap, shame, bollywoodkigandagi, vulgar, disgusting, cringe
- Moral Policing: toxic, values, culture, india, hindu

We find that the category with the biggest collection of tweets was “Moral Policing”, with 1,306 tweets that try to convey how various components of the film and its songs will affect Hindu culture and Indian values. Following this, the second biggest category was “Insults”, with 754 tweets. While Body/Slut shaming tweets were smaller in number (398), their tweet content was much more toxic.

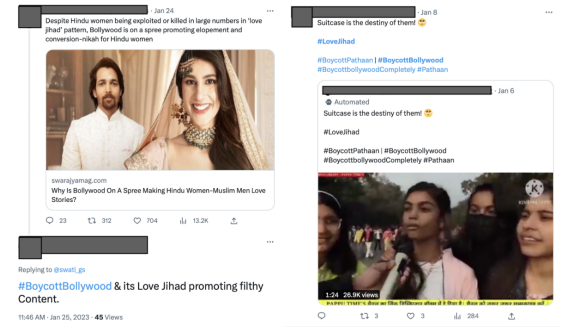

Figure 19.0.5: Sample of tweets connecting Bollywood with Love Jihad

Another kind of misogynistic messaging that adds a direct dimension of anti-Muslim prejudice intersecting with the misogynistic messaging, was the discourse around "love jihad". This includes media (see Fig. 19.0.5) as well as heavy use of hashtags like "#LoveJihaad" and "#LoveJihad_ActOfTerrorism".

Discussion and Future work

While Indian Twitter has been routinely used to launch boycotting campaigns [3], #BoycottBollywood provides insights into the evolution of online activism and about what really drives a movement. This paper presents two main findings. First, an inspection of popular tweets shows #BoycottBollywood's thinly veiled effort to move towards Hindu nationalism, central to which is the idea of integrating religion, nationalism and culture. Second, while past work has presented extensively studied criticisms [6,7], in the Hindi film industry around its problematic portrayal of women, caste and religion, it can be seen that the #BoycottBollywood community depends on similar methods to spread their narrative.

This study can be further extended to link changes in narrative to changes in the social network and influencers in order to answer whether discourse shifts organically or if it's a strategy to enlist more users. Moreover, this raises some important questions about the role fringe communities play in the evolution of online movements.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY

FINFLUENCERS AS INVESTMENT ADVISORS—TIME TO REIN THEM IN?

Kirthana Singh Khurana
kirthanasingh.khurana@yale.edu
LL.M. Candidate, Yale Law School

We live in an era in which, thanks to the digital revolution having catalyzed the media ecosystem, social media have taken center stage and become a significant part of all walks of life. One of the most significant developments has been the growth of financial influencers on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp, among others. Colloquially referred to as finfluencers, these social media influencers often dish out investment tips and recommendations without much professional experience in an environment devoid of mandatory disclosures. What makes matters worse is that these influencers are neither duly registered nor licensed to offer investment advice. This paper considers arguments for and against regulating financial influencers on social media in India. After exploring the regulatory regime already existing in some leading countries, the writer endeavors to identify the regulatory gaps in India and the desirability of bridging these gaps through suitable steps at the level of the market regulator, the Securities and Exchange Board of India, and the Advertising Standards Council of India. The paper concludes with recommendations to address this deficit through necessary regulatory interventions.

Introduction

Scrolling through my YouTube homepage, I have often come across thumbnails of videos that say, "the simple trick to double your money" or "how to make USD 500 a day trading stocks". Social media has transformed from being a platform to watch travel and music videos to a source of information on finance and investments. The lawyer in me wonders how sophisticated investment advisors' advice is followed by disclaimers that often run into several pages while YouTubers get away with giving free unsolicited financial advice without any such warnings. We hear similar disclaimers whenever we watch or hear insurance or mutual fund advertisements on television, social media websites, or radio. So, why treat online content creators differently?

Post-pandemic, India has witnessed the mushrooming of social media influencers and influencer marketing. Influencers often dish out investment tips and recommendations without much professional experience. Usually, influencers are sponsored by companies to talk about their products. This menace came into the spotlight in March 2023 when the Securities and Exchange Board of India ("SEBI") barred an Indian company from using YouTube channels to manipulate stock prices. In the instant case, specific videos on YouTube communicated false and misleading news to viewers and recommended that they buy the company's shares in order to earn extraordinary profits. This was followed by an increase in the price and trading volume of the scrip of the listed company. The participating entities were also barred from trading in the capital markets for their involvement in stock manipulation schemes. [3] The market turbulence caused by such "pump and dump" schemes has been a global phenomenon and has led to the introduction of a series of regulations across geographies. [7]

While stock market manipulation is an age-old phenomenon, digital media platforms have recently become the safe haven for such activities. Influencers are increasingly disseminating unverified information, which goes against India's broad contours of securities regulation. As the viewership of such financial influencers (also termed "finfluencers") on YouTube and other similar platforms increases, there is a possibility that less sophisticated investors may fall into the trap of bad or motivated advice and invest in stocks that may not turn out to be suitable investments.

The finfluencers are gaining popularity because of the nature of the videos and content they put out on their channels. Retail investors are not well versed with the financial jargon and thus are unable to comprehend the information available online or in newspapers on the stocks they are interested in investing. [3] They also lack the capacity to do the necessary due diligence. Content creators often

use simple words and upload content in a mix of regional languages, which makes it easier for viewers to understand. Moreover, this content is available free of cost, thus providing greater accessibility to the masses. [8]

Traditionally, financial services and financial advisory space have been regulated through laws and regulations, including consumer protection and corporate laws. According to the SEBI guidelines, entities involved in the business of giving investment advice must be mandatorily registered with SEBI, and advisors are required to meet specific educational and professional qualifications. SEBI has laid down a code of conduct that such entities need to adhere to before disclosing any relevant information and giving investment advice. Many finfluencers, however, are not licensed financial advisors yet provide similar advice to the masses. The risks they potentially pose to customers and the financial market are areas of concern and merit prompt and effective regulatory measures. At the time of writing this paper, SEBI is in the process of releasing a set of regulations for influencers providing financial advice on social media websites, including Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. [6,7] The aim of this paper is to understand the need for such regulations and define their broad forms. My argument is that financial advice given by social media influencers should be regulated and that they must follow a code of conduct that is similar to the code otherwise applicable to other (mostly offline) financial advisers.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST REGULATION

As per statistics, as of 2022, the influencer marketing industry in India was valued at over INR 12 billion and is expected to be around INR 26 billion by 2026. Nearly 55 million urban Indians were direct consumers of influencers of various kinds as of 2022. [4] Thus, as a profession, influencer marketing is lucrative and would attract more Indians in the near future. On the one hand, this profession may provide a decent livelihood to people who seek value in having the liberty to work from home, enjoy time flexibility, and communicate with the masses in their regional languages. On the other hand, as this profession grows, the reach of influencer marketing is also going to expand, thus affecting the lives and content consumption of millions of users.

Influencers in the past have taken umbrage at the idea of regulation and have taken refuge under the articles related to freedom of speech and expression and of trade and profession, enshrined in the Indian constitution. [8] They may also claim that the information provided by them is unsolicited, free of cost, based on their experiences, and meets the terms and conditions of the specific website.

Furthermore, the subscribers of their channels are not their clients, as anyone who has access to the internet can watch their content.

Although the art of content creation should be respected, the sector cannot exploit that veneer to sway investment decisions through its content or commentary. These promotional videos should be treated as being akin to financial advertising, and thus adequate disclosures should be in place to inform the viewers of the risks involved in such transactions. A potential impediment for regulators could be distinguishing between videos that provide financial education to the audience and those that provide financial advice. Moreover, who bears the burden of monitoring and ascertaining the nature of the content uploaded by the finfluencer? For regulators, clamping down on thousands of financial creators who regularly produce content could also be challenging and financially burdensome.

Securities regulation in any country works on the principle of investor protection through a mechanism of adequate and timely disclosures. Following the same argument, I advocate for greater disclosures in this space rather than censorship of such content. Besides, such disclosures shall restrict the growth of unscrupulous persons, paving the way for a greater following of genuine finfluencers.

ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF REGULATION

Lack of regulation and oversight in the digital world can be dangerous, particularly as regards its inability to keep a check on flimsy financial strategies that are neither ethical nor foolproof. Seeking advice from an experienced, registered financial adviser is always safer than turning to a self-proclaimed online financial guru. To quote a recent example, according to the data released by the Advertising Standards Council of India, influencer ads constituted more than 92 per cent of the misleading cryptocurrency advertisements examined by the regulator in early 2022. In the same vein, SEBI also submitted a proposal to the Parliament's Standing Committee on Finance to consider banning celebrities and public figures from endorsing cryptocurrencies. [11]

Many finfluencers often lack the credibility and authority of a certified financial professional. Since there are no prerequisite qualifications for making a social media account, anyone can claim to be an advisor. Even though the host channels may garner a lot of interest and may have subscribers running into lakhs, it is crucial to check the credibility and professional experience of the finfluencers before following their advice. Sponsorship for videos constitutes the primary source of income for content creators. Creators may be promoting a product, service, or investment in order to receive commission or compensation. These affiliations

may color their financial advice, leading to wrong or incomplete information for the viewers. The finfluencer may not have conducted the requisite due diligence before advertising a particular financial avenue. In case the investments fail, the investor could lose a large portion of their invested capital. Further, to make the matter worse and as observed in the recent case mentioned above, often the comments section of such videos is disabled, making it difficult to protect or forewarn innocent investors.

Many influencers claim in their videos that they guarantee profits within a few days, which entices their viewers to the markets and impels them to invest. As there is a lack of regulatory oversight, social media platforms have advisors ranging from unqualified to super-experienced.

The viewers are left to themselves to decide whose advice they would want to follow. In case the influencers are regulated, at least the viewers can tread with confidence while deciding about their investments. The viewers, who are often gullible investors, should ideally be cautioned regarding the nature of the advice being disseminated by the influencers and also about the source of information. Based on this, they can be best placed to take a call on whether they would want to follow the advice or not.

Recommendations

(I) SEBI Regulations

In Australia, finfluencers face a risk of penalties and imprisonment for up to five years in case they provide financial advice without a prior license. The Financial Market Authority of New Zealand also issued a 'Guide to Talking About Money Online' in January 2021 to provide tips for both consumers and social media influencers engaging in related activities. The Monetary Authority of Singapore has also warned social media content creators against posting false or misleading statements and other activities that may constitute market abuse under securities laws. [1,2]

On similar lines, SEBI should lay down specific rules for financial influencers. In case they provide independent financial advice, that should come with a disclaimer that the stock market is risky and that the investors should do their own research before investing. Further, in case any false or misleading information is disseminated by the influencers, there should be strict penalties in place.

In case they are being sponsored by specific companies to talk about their investment products, the same should be disclosed clearly in the videos. At the same time, a clear distinction has to be made between financial education and

financial advice, and these terms should be unambiguously defined. YouTube has proved to be a game-changer in the field of financial literacy as well. Thus, the uploading of financial education videos should rather be encouraged by SEBI. However, investment advice needs to be brought under regulatory scrutiny.

(II) Steps to be taken by the ASCI and the Consumer Affairs Ministry

ASCI should also come up with guidelines with respect to financial advertising on social media platforms. A standard operating procedure should be laid down for influencers regarding the disclosures about the risky nature of investments in stock markets and that financial advisors on social media are not "registered investment advisors" [6]. In case the video is not sponsored, a disclaimer should be included indicating how investment advice is an opinion based on personal research and due diligence. Measures should also be undertaken by the ASCI and the Central Consumer Protection Authority to curb false advertising on such platforms to curb stock market manipulation.

Conclusion

There is no denying the fact that social media and influencers are having an ever-increasing impact on people's decision-making. Although finfluencers can contribute to improving the general public's financial literacy, they also pose several risks regarding investor protection and financial stability. The financial and sectoral regulators need to urgently address this. Though the guidelines for finfluencers across jurisdictions vary, one unmissable common feature is the requirement for meeting the minimum qualifications for giving financial advice. Cross-sector collaboration is also necessary to mitigate the risks to investors and the Indian capital market.

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CHAPTER

TWENTYONE

RATIONAL BY DESIGN: THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ALGORITHMS ON HUMAN BEHAVIOUR AND SELF-IDENTITY IN INDIA

Maanas Singh, Drishti Anil Khatri
{mas00642,drk00007}@students.stir.ac.uk
MSc. Behavioural Science for Management, Behavioural Science Centre, University of Stirling

Rational algorithms exist all around us and are ingrained deeply in our lives. They claim to help us connect with people, information, and even our supposed future lovers. Although algorithms achieve most of their goals accurately, and humans benefit greatly from them, we as behavioural scientists cannot help but question- at what cost? We acknowledge that these algorithms have simplified human life by reducing choice overload, but sometimes they also lead people to unfavourable long-term outcomes. We theorise this to be a result of the algorithms being designed for the 'Homoeconomicus' rather than homo sapiens.

This paper identifies the interplay of social media algorithms, the social media influencers and their attempts at audience capturing. We then argue their mediation which leads to polarisation in the community. We summarise our position by identifying our concerns with this interplay when it raises ethical questions about

fairness, justice and long-term benefits in digital product consumption and policy-making for the next billion users.

Introduction

The neo-classical economic perspective speculates that people behave rationally in every decision-making moment to attain their goals. To maintain a uniform understanding of rationality, economists across the geographic region often assume these preferences represent people's true interests, as opposed to involving other socio-economic or psychological elements [7]. Rationality in economics is based on a set of seven assumptions, some of which are, 'humans are Bayesian information processors', 'have well-defined and stable preferences' and 'maximise their expected utility' [23]. The reason we draw attention to these assumptions is that they are not representative of humans and their desires but still create foundational blocks of various Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine learning (ML) models [10,21].

An established model of thinking in cognitive psychology states that Homo sapiens are governed by two differing and integrated systems of thinking. System 1 is for fast intuitive thinking, and System 2 is for a slow deliberate analytical approach (which requires greater cognitive effort) [31]. Considering the number of decisions humans may have to make in a day, these System 1 heuristics are useful but may lead humans to make systematic errors [28]. For example, when a person 'pulls' on a door when it says 'push' [20] or invests all of their savings in products endorsed by a prominent social media influencer [1], we should not assume that the person is acting in their best interest. This may reflect the combination of their actual preference and decision-making errors.

For this paper, we specifically focus on Recommender Systems in Machine Learning and their rational attempts to maximise product interaction. We also draw attention to the social media influencers and their attempts at audience capturing. Then, we argue the effects of their mediation that enable partisanship and polarisation in the identity construction of India.

Cognitive biases and the social media

We can attribute the rapid rise in people coming online from rural and urban India within the last decade to factors like cheaper data plans, mar-

ketable technology, and the Digital India Initiative [2]. Many of the users coming online have little or no knowledge of personal computers. The estimated number of social media users in India in 2020 was approximately 518 million and is estimated to grow to 1.5 billion by 2040 [3]. The democratised digital space has allowed people access to information and resources. We, first-hand, witnessed both the positive and negative social impact of these platforms during the Covid-19 crisis [32]. Platforms meant for personal messaging have become platforms for content consumption, curated by unsupervised moderators or editors. As we progress towards rapid digitisation of information, services and governance in developing countries, we emphasise the need for analysis and regulation of human interaction with the algorithmic models.

While a group of scholars choose to emulate human cognition, others aim to create intelligence with a lack of concern for human emotions [25]. Today's algorithms are designed for the 'Homo-economicus' (a rational decision-maker) [10]. We argue researchers should seek AI to understand human intelligence as a property of a socio-economic system rather than a specific human attribution [14]. This we theorise may be influential in designing better and more inclusive digital artefacts. AI models, like many human-designed systems, are bounded by rationality. The criterion for their achievement relies on the need to maximise the 'interaction' between the product and the consumer (in tune with the rational economic assumption that people always seek to maximise their expected utility). We can measure the interaction through a variety of proxies based on different contexts. For example, the number of clicks and daily engagement, to name a few. While we as authors understand the complexity and levels within each measure, for this paper we want to annotate these proxies under an umbrella to highlight their overall effect on triggering cognitive biases. Although the algorithmic systems ethically aim to aid people in making better decisions, sometimes they affect different people differently [8]. We assume that these asymmetric preferences between people often arise from the biases within the design of the models itself.

Various studies on the use of social media highlight the attentional capture of system 1 (emotion- driven) thinking. They elaborate on the diffusion of logic in consumers approaching content during

heavy discourse [18] [27]. Nadia Bahemia builds on this by elaborating how people think emotionally when choosing matches on dating platforms [19]. Verhults et al., in their study, assert that familiarity of traits activates pos-

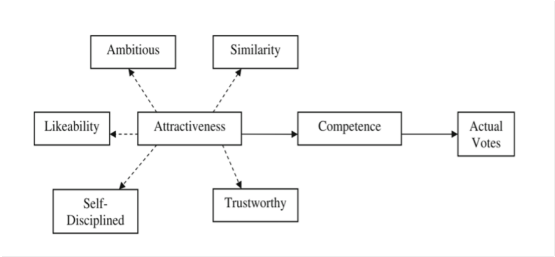

Figure 21.0.1: The halo effect around attractiveness and the causal path from attractiveness, through competence judgments to the actual vote shares for Senate elections [29]

Figure 21.0.2: Amitabh Bachchan campaigning on Allahabad streets in 1984 (HT) [16]

itive feelings used for constructive judgement related to a person's competence, creating a Halo effect [29]. For example, Amitabh Bachchan's successful win in the 8th Lok Sabha elections against H. N. Bahuguna, the former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh can be attributed to his public appeal as a Bollywood superstar [16].

Similarly, as social media influencers themselves are users of the various platforms they alter their content to increase engagement with circles, they believe subscribe to the same perception. At the centre, consumers seek information that fits their existing beliefs. These together create unconscious filter bubbles known as confirmation bias [22].

As social animals, we like to conform to the expectations and beliefs of the group we most resonate with, called herding or the bandwagon effect. This very often leads to in-group and out-group biases. For primal human needs, the hedonic expectation of group comfort is necessary. As research indicates humans base decisions on group behaviour than performing a tedious cost-benefit analysis at an individual level [15] [4]. Although herding can have a positive effect and induce good social norms, it can, like other biases also lead to long-term preference reversal in one's well-being [30]. Research further elaborates that the lack of diversity in information sharing in social

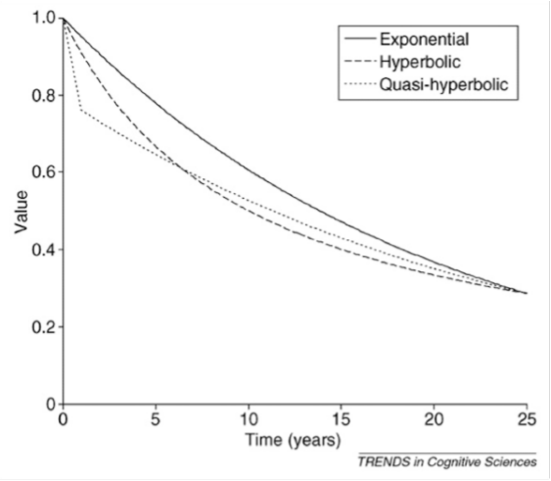

Figure 21.0.3: Exponential discounting assumes a constant rate of discounting, Hyperbolic discounting is generally greater for short time periods than long periods, Quasi hyperbolic follows a similar form as hyperbolic after the initial period [6].

interaction often distorts the population's perception of the community [11] [26]. The repeated exposure to misinformation or biased reporting creates an echo chamber which restricts people from electing the best possible outcomes. Literature helps us understand users are also likely to decide the authenticity of information based on similar assumptions of authority [12] [13]. For example, if a user regularly interacts with one-sided information on any topic in social media, the algorithm will learn and predict this as default need and further nudge polarisation [9].

The rational algorithm understands the user's preferences through pattern recognition. The models can assume the user's current choices (a deviation from a standard long-term preference) to be a true rational preference. For the models to do their job better, they tend to loop back these 'irrational' preferences in a much shorter duration to create quicker and more predictable feedback loops [24]. Simultaneously, this interaction between the algorithm and the user capitalises on the innate human tendency to discount future gains in seek of instant profit (in this case, a dopamine hit triggered by social media validation) [6]. We have noted this to have negative payoffs on the well-being and privacy of the users [5] [12] [26].

Conclusion

In conclusion, we as behavioural scientists argue that the capitalisation of rational algorithmic agents on cognitive biases of the users raises questions

of fairness and justice when they lead to negative extremes [17]. Flyvbjerg further states that "political biases are a major challenge to any project, along with 'Strategic misinterpretation' which can distort or misinterpret information to secure more commitment" [13]. As authors, we do not say that digital transformation is necessarily bad, but that we should elicit preferences and systems that focus on the behavioural aspects of human nature.

Human interaction in digital space is a dense topic of discourse partly because it begs to question how much mediating power agents of algorithmic systems should have, and at what level policymakers should intervene. And, if governmental or private stakeholders should even make some of these decisions. We understand that 'choice architects' exist at every level of social communication, and one cannot completely avoid them or our own innate biases. But one way to navigate them on social platforms would be by nudging for a transparent framework of regulations and digital policy-making that takes into consideration the various socio-economic and psychological influences of the users.

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CHAPTER

TWENTYTWO

RAW AND REAL: HOW TRAVEL INFLUENCERS PACKAGE THE NATION

Rishita Chaudhary
rishita.chaudhary_ug23@ashoka.edu.in
Ashoka University

This paper delineates how Indian travel influencers construct and morph the tourist gaze of the domestic viewer. The author argues that through Instagram reels, YouTube shorts and vlogs, domestic travel Social Media Influencers (SMIs) propagate a skewed understanding of the nation—one that necessarily (a) claims to offer a glimpse of unseen and authentic India that exists outside of where the viewer resides; (b) can be discovered only in remote, interior parts of the country such as towns/villages or larger neglected, peripheral regions such as the North-East; (c) consists of people who are uni-dimensionally kind, generous and happy—living in peace and harmony with no conflict. Anything that does not fit this paradigm is edited out and not presented to the viewers. Thereby these SMIs articulate an imaginative geography of the nation that not only echoes their ideology but frequently melds to become a constitutive component of the very spaces they imagine.

Introduction

With increasing digitisation and internet penetration, social media platforms have refashioned tremendous aspects of tourism. Travel influencers now play a burgeoning role in shaping viewer's travel aspiration and destination choices. They share their favorite trips, go-to destinations, and travel strategies on social media to prod viewers to embark on similar journeys.

India boasts a booming industry of travel influencers, with creators catering to both domestic and international audiences. Some popular names include Dimpi Sanghvi (3.7m followers), Shasank Sanghvi (2.4m followers) and MonkeyMagic (1.7m followers). They monetize this venture through collaboration with travel agencies, tour operators and local businesses to endorse their brand and packages. This includes brand sponsorship and affiliate marketing of goods such as travel accessories (backpack, sports gear) and/or equipment for documentation (drones, cameras etc). Some even offer their own merchandise and paid travel courses (plan your trip better or document your journey like a professional).

Drawing from Foucault, the tourist gaze of these SMIs reflect "an asymmetrical relationship of power in which they occupy a position of authority and control over the subject of their penetrating gaze"[2]. The category of SMIs (and the tourists they eventually draw), are vastly more privileged than the gazed, especially more-so in rural locations. They possess both economic capital (cash to rent cars and pay for certain kinds of accommodation) and cultural capital (technical know-how of using professional cameras for high-quality documentation).

Enabling quick, free circulation of high-resolution spatial representations of travel destinations, these travel influencers inculcate novel forms of socially-influenced ways of seeing. This paper focuses on domestic Indian creators looking at domestic destinations for domestic audiences. Honing on Instagram and Youtube, this paper dissects tourism-centered representations sociologically, by dually scrutinizing what they encompass and what they leave out.

Deconstructing the Tourist Gaze

A growing sect of Indian travel SMIs promise to satisfy their viewer's desire for authenticity by offering experiences of real travelers rather than of mere

Figure 22.0.1: Articulation of a post-modern traveller rather than a tourist. MonkeyMagic's channel catapulted into success after his mini-vlog series featuring his solo backpack journey across India

tourists. However in his seminal piece of work Tourist Gaze, sociologist John Urry argues that there are no authentic travelers [6]. Tourism as an industry of difference operates on the principle that tourists temporarily seek pursuits outside the realm of regulated work in new environments for leisure purposes. Once in these novel settings, their gaze is directed towards distinct landscapes or exotic spectacles that contrast with quotidian experiences.

This gaze, however, is far from neutral. For a region to be tourist-worthy, it needs to be constituted as worth-visiting. This authorisation is done by travel professionals who play an active role in constructing the tourist gaze.

They do so through a collection of signs, which serve as cues for tourists to direct their attention towards particular landscapes or exotic spectacles.When tourists look at the Pyramid or the Eiffel Tower, they are not merely seeing these landmarks in isolation, but rather, they capture the popular gaze of Egypt as an exotic, ancient civilization or Paris as a haven for romance. The pursuit of signs is integral to the tourist experience, with tourists constantly seeking out "signs of Frenchness, typical Italian behavior, exemplary Oriental scenes"[4] etc.

This gaze is then captured, reproduced and distributed through the means of mobile images and representational technologies. This further reinforces this gaze and entrenches how future tourists interact with these spaces.

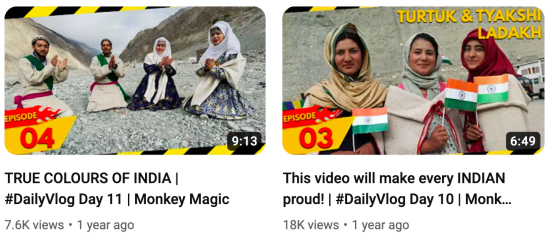

Figure 22.0.2: Blend of tourism and national identity in SMI MagicMonkey's vlogs

Unraveling the nation through travel

A growing number of domestic travel SMIs are choosing to reject mainstream, commercial tourist spots (such as the Taj Mahal) as signs of India and instead offer new sites that they argue reflect the "real and raw" culture of India. By doing so they perpetuate new objects of the tourist gaze. This vision however is not a passive reflection of reality that is simply *out there* but rather an epistemic field that is carefully curated to signify what SMIs frame as the real India. And with it a certain brand of nationhood.

Scholars like Lowenthal (1975) have argued that visiting heritage sites by domestic tourists helps in creation and sustenance of an united national identity through reaffirmation of national meanings and values [7]. Tourism therefore becomes essential in the ideological representation of a nation-state.

Benedict Anderson conceptualizes the nation as an "imagined community". Imagined, since despite never meeting most of their country's inhabitants, one still feels a shared sense of belonging to a group. Community since this imagination is rooted in "horizontal comradeship" between members of the state despite "actual inequality and exploitations that may prevail in each"[1]. Building on Anderson's work on how print capitalism helps forge nationalism, certain political scholars have showcased similar mechanisms at play between cyberspace and nationalism [8].

Travel SMIs, through domestic technologies, contribute to intensified circulation of tourism-centered content which play an active role in not only informing but also creating a certain imagination of the nation.

Authentic, Undiscovered India

To prod viewers to travel, these SMIs employ the rhetoric of dual discovery - of the real, untouched India and through it of oneself. Through their

destination choices and narrative, they construct a frame that insinuates that the real nation exists far away from the urban viewer, towards more interior, peripheral and neglected sects of the nation. Indian villages' unique ethnic diversity along with its absence (or slow adoption) of modernity, provides a spatio-temporal difference that SMIs tap onto to advocate as vacation sites for urban-dwelling domestic tourists. This imagination therefore necessitates the viewers' displacement - whether physical or corporeal - in articulating the nation.

This is demonstrated by SMIs employing phrases like *heart of nation; unseen, untouched corner; hidden gem; nobody knows about them; The [destination] that we never knew existed; you won't believe this is in India* as titles for their videos.

However, selection of these unseen sites are not as innocent as they appear. Only countryside that are visually appealing to prospective viewers are selected. These usually reflect the visual splendor of the place - a beautiful sunset on a mountain-range, a secret water-fall or perhaps a quaint monastery. These videos feature the picturesque, while omitting other markers of rural landscape such as "farm machinery, telegraph wires, derelict land, polluted water"[1].

These landscapes are sometimes juxtaposed and drawn parallel to sites in the West, with SMIs reacting with both surprise and subsequent pride in India. Ronnie & Barty are couple travelers known for their joint youtube account of the same name, boasting 348k Youtube. Their videos regularly demonstrate this phenomenon - having referred to mountain-ranges of domestic villages in Ladakh as reminiscent of Italian Dolomites and Icelandic towns. Such rhetoric further peddles the narrative of the authentic, waiting to be discovered Indian beauty. One that can rival even the West - evoking a nationalist sentiment of pride while implicitly revealing the colonial hangover rampant in Indian society

Facade of unanimously happy, conflict-free India

Another recurring motif in these videos is one of domesticating the exotic. First these videos hook the viewer with a promise of the real, unknown heart of the nation. These are then framed by shots that are not dissimilar to the Western tourist's gaze - deconstructing rural and peripheral locations as the *Exotic Other*. An example of this would be a shot of ethnic women dressed in

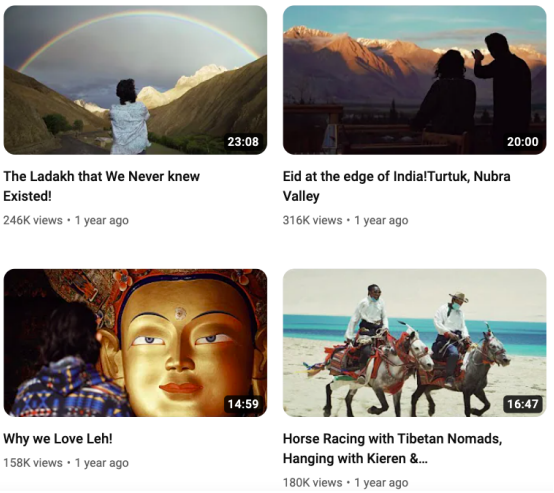

Figure 22.0.3: Frame from Ronnie and Barty's Youtube channel. Depiction of the *Exotic Other* and Unseen India

regional costumes participating in festivities. However, once the SMI begins interacting with the natives, similarities and commonness are increasingly highlighted. For instance, videos in the North-East have multiple shots of happy, laughing local children playing cricket and consuming maggi just like in the mainland.

The narrative implies that if one really looks, people in India are not all that different. Regardless of where citizens are situated, they're all one people belonging to the same nation-state. This is a nationalist framing that "attempts to assimilate or incorporate culturally distinctive territories in a given state" [5] erasing any signs of conflict/discord.

MonkeyMagic's videos often draw his confessions on having "intense bouts of belonging", "home-like feeling", "finding a small family" when describing his journeys. He remarks astonishment at being able to so easily forge strong connections despite cultural and language barriers. However, by framing indigenous communities as the *Exotic other*, these SMIs only superficially represent their cultures. Similarly it erases the NorthEast region's long history of neglect by the Indian mainland and Insurgency movements. Such omissions allow SMIs to sell these visions as reproducible day-dreams and fantasies to viewers. .

Moreover, these videos also articulate a vision of the nation-state where abysmal poverty resides with resounding happiness. People are ultimately big-hearted, great and good people who live in harmony with everyone. These destinations are framed as "little unsuspected paradise(s), where all is peace, rusticity and happy poverty."[1]

Figure 22.0.4: A picture from travel SMI Isa Khan's Instagram Feed depicting children from Leh in regional attire

These videos often regurgitate essential narratives of the locals and how helpful and gratuitous they are. However this production of the video masks

- The economic transaction that renders this subservience and kindness of the hospitality and travel entrepreneurs
- any mishaps or rude encounters

Conclusion

Travel SMIs peddle a narrative to domestic viewers that they don't know the real India. It's elsewhere. It's exotic and undiscovered. However through various encounters with the travel SMIs, similarities and one-ness of the natives and the SMIs (and in-conjunction the viewer) are revealed because they're all ultimately Indians. This is a domestication of the exotic that employs the nation as a frame. Viewers thereby formulate a conception of these spatial sites in particular, and the nation-state in general, not via direct experience but by idealized representations that they interiorize via videos produced by travel SMIs.

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CHAPTER

TWENTYTHREE

FINFLUENCERS IN INDIA: NEW PARADIGMS OF FINANCIAL TRUST AND AUTHORITY

Krithi D. Ramaswamy
krithi.ramaswamy@graduateinstitute.ch
The Geneva Graduate Institute for International and Development Studies

This paper explores the emerging trend of financial influencers on social media platforms in India. Finfluencers, as they are commonly known, are individuals on social media who use their educational and professional background, and the interactive features of the platforms, to disseminate financial information to large audiences. This author argues that the growth of Indian finfluencers on Instagram and YouTube over the last few years provides an avenue to explore how social media platforms allow for changing definitions of financial trust and authority. The demystification of the financial lexicon and institutions through finfluencers, therefore, is a lens through which people can understand how social media platforms allow for a shift in the way dominant economic paradigms in India are configured.

Introduction

The past few decades have seen a proliferation of individuals on internet spaces. A particularly interesting phenomenon has been the rise of finflu-

encers on social media platforms. The growth of Indian finfluencers presents a new avenue for research on how digital spaces are fundamentally altering not only traditionally dominant institutions such as financial authorities, but also how the relations created through social media are changing the ways in which people interact with and perceive these authorities in the first place.

The need to study this phenomenon closely is also supported by the recent regulations proposed by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) in November 2022, to closely monitor and implement guidelines for finfluencers. SEBI also proposed that finfluencers who are gaining traction on social media should be required to register themselves, in order to keep a close watch on potential fraud and scams [2] [17].

SEBI's proposed regulations and guidelines signal a new kind of relationship between the state and social media influencers. With central authorities in India having a vested interest in the behaviour of finfluencers, it can definitely be argued that digital spaces actively alter broader socio-political and economic landscapes. Secondly, these decisions also signal mistrust between the state and individual digital platforms, particularly when it comes to finance [2]. With new financial frauds and scams being peddled everyday to the unsuspecting public, a certain level of caution does make sense. However, while there is mistrust on the part of the state, the growth of finfluencers is in itself a testament to the trust that a large number of people place on these individuals.

The growth of finfluencers and the increasing scrutiny placed on them by state financial authorities shows they are not just "supplementing" or adding to existing financial structures. The fact that finfluencers use digital platforms in creative ways to not only present themselves in a certain light, but to also interact differently with their audiences shows that the finfluencing area is slowly but definitively changing how we imagine who financial authorities are, and how we ourselves can access and are placed within financial hierarchies.

The fundamental question I ask therefore, is why finfluencers are seen as trusted authorities, if not full advisors, on matters of financial importance? Further, how do they use social media platforms to solidify their position and gain this trust? Finally, what can this phenomenon mean for both "new age" finance and digital studies in India?

Figure 23.0.1: Accompanying illustration to a piece in The Morning Context on the unchecked rise of the finfluencer, depicting the "dark side" of unverified financial content and the need to curb financial influencing. (https://themorningcontext.com/internet/the-unchecked-rise-of-indias-finfluencers)

Navigating Expertise between the State and Finfluencers

One of the primary reasons for SEBI's proposed regulations on finfluencers is that financial domains are spaces wherein only "qualified" individuals should be giving out advice. Nehal Mota, in a comparison of finance to health, pointed out that in both these domains, the knowledge gap between professionals and lay people is so large that external regulations are required to ensure that the public does not receive fraudulent advice, get scammed etc [7]. When it comes to setting up regulatory bodies to ensure these checks and balances on finfluencers, SEBI has focused on using professional and educational qualifications as a means to ensure that only individuals who meet this minimum criteria will be authorised to disseminate financial advice [17].

Firstly, it can be argued that this educational and professional criteria setting acts as a barrier to those who want to enter these spaces based on their personal experiences with finance. This is particularly relevant, given that finfluencers have become popular due to their ability to disseminate complex financial jargon to large audiences with no financial background. These regulations also run the risk of reproducing existing hegemonic factors in financial spaces, which in India tend to be dominated mostly by upper caste, upper class, urban men. The current finfluencer space in India, while by no means "inclusive", nonetheless allows for the creation of expertise in new forms. There are a few prominent women finfluencers with high traction and a large following, such as Shreyaa Kapoor, Anushka Rathod and Neha

Nagar.

Furthermore, the lack of formal qualifications and credentials has allowed individuals without traditional financial backgrounds to build their reputation by using the features of social media, including the ability of digital platforms to posit the creation of a particular self, develop parasocial relations and build streamlined narratives. Many Indian finfluencers do not have professional backgrounds in finance, transitioning instead from adjacent fields such as corporate consulting and MBA degrees.

Ankur Warikoo for example, regularly engages with his followers through Instagram stories and comment sections. While his content is currently more motivational and lifestyle oriented, much of his early content drew from his experiences as an investor, an entrepreneur, and how to be smarter with money. He also emphasises his personal journey with finance far more than his financial credentials, in response to people's fears and worries regarding financial literacy. By drawing on his personal stories of beginning a financial journey later in life, Warikoo's appeal to audiences lies far more in his persona and charisma, and the "drive" that is so often associated with financial independence, than in financial qualifications.

Parallely, Neha Nagar, one of the top creators in the finfluencer space, highlights the struggles and obstacles she faced on her financial trajectory. Aspects of her life such as failing the CA exam and overcoming gender discrimination are regularly featured in interviews and her online content. Apart from Nagar's career trajectory in wealth management and taxation, it is visible from the engagement on her social media profiles that people follow and trust her because of her perceived honesty about her struggles and "failures", as well as how to recover from them [3].

Expertise through Authenticity

Taking this as a departure point, it can be argued that social media spaces allow for expertise and credibility to be constructed and perceived differently, even in financial spaces wherein professional qualifications are often seen as paramount. I argue that positing an authentic self in these situations is linked not only to the individual but also to their tenuous links to traditional financial institutions [4]. While they might have been, or might still be, working "traditional" finance or finance adjacent jobs, their positioning as a finfluencer is based on subverting usual expectations of financial expertise.

Figure 23.0.2: Finfluencers Ankur Warikoo, Pranjal Kamra, and Rachna Ranade on the cover of Business Today in 2021

The role of authenticity in social media has been relatively well researched [16] [18] [15]. However, the emergence of finfluencers is a new avenue through which to look at what counts as "authentic" within financial spaces on the internet. Credibility relies not only on traditional qualifications, but through informal testimonials and interactions with other users online [1]. Finfluencers like Ankur Warikoo and Sharan Hegde often interact with their followers and online communities through Instagram stories and lives where they answer questions regarding finance and their own personal financial choices. Warikoo particularly, as an influencer who has arguably branched out from finance into lifestyle and "motivational" content, draws heavily from personal life trajectories to sell his credibility as someone to trust.

Hegde, on the other hand, claims to have pioneered finance comedy in India. His comedy sketches are infused with pop culture references, and his delivery and content style is admittedly influenced by actors and comedians on social media platforms. Hegde's brand of finfluencing is a prime example of creating a social media narrative of relatability and authenticity by drawing on existing features and content on social media. By combining pop culture references, successful stylistic techniques of influencers in other content spaces, and sharing personal financial achievements, Hegde's brand and narrative is a financial guru for younger audiences.

Digital platforms and new avenues of financial trust

I argue that trust and authority in these "new-age" financial advisors is primarily created through an emerging form of narrative authority. Narrative authority is a concept posited by anthropologist Stefan Liens through his study of financial analysts in a Swiss bank. Liens argues that the construction of financial expertise is based on the ability of financial analysts and advisors to create and sell narratives of themselves as confident, knowledgeable experts who can accurately predict future financial trends. It is also based on a distancing of the expert from the layman, relying on creating a shroud of mystery around financial expertise, further adding to the image of these experts as highly intelligent, credible, and trustworthy [13] [10] [8].

The narrative authority of finfluencers on the other hand, is based more on their positioning as authentic, relatable, and reachable sources of information and advice. While their financial credentials remain an important part of the narrative, the focus of their platforms is on reaching their audience through relatability - whether that is through personal success stories or comedic sketches. Financial expertise is not constructed only through knowledge of the industry but through the ability of the financial expert to create a cohesive and seemingly transparent narrative about themselves. This form of narrative authority relies not on distancing, but rather, on the attempt to bridge the gap between financial experts and the public.

This narrativisation is compounded by the mechanisms of social media platforms to blur the lines between the "personal" and the "professional", the individual and the audience [12] [11] [14]. These platforms allow for a simultaneous narrowing of the financial gap while still positioning finfluencers as experts- experts who are at the same time, highly qualified and yet relatable to the average financial beginner.

Conclusion

This position paper has been an introduction to potential future studies in new age finance and social media platforms in India. I argue that it is important to understand the recent surge of finfluencers in India as presenting a pivotal shift in how financial trust is constructed. Importantly, this change is facilitated by the nature of social media and digital platforms: through

the different ways in which content can be created, newer audiences to reach, and unique ways to present as an individual creator and consumer through social media.

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CHAPTER

TWENTYFOUR

THAT'S CRINGE: HOW AESTHETICS AND ALGORITHMS AFFECT MONETIZATION

Nishtha Khunteta, Qudsia Rahman
{nishthakhunteta,qudsiarahman02}@gmail.com
Ashoka University

Digital short-video content is often classified as being "cringe" on social media platforms, based on the creators' appearance and behavior. These factors are directly influenced by the creators' caste and class. Cringe content is shared and viewed by elite consumers ironically, or to mock their creator for their ignorance over what constitutes good content. Visual appearance and social distinctions, thus, become factors that distinguish cringe content from good content. While elite consumers directly contribute to the labeling of content (and therefore, a certain class of creators) as cringe, platforms aid in its suppression. Social media platforms use collaborative-filtering algorithms, which essentially lead to the "ghettoization" of online spaces. The authors suggest that the distinction between cringe and good (based on social distinctions), when combined with the ghettoization of online spaces, restricts monetary benefits to only the upper-class influencers, while subjugating the lower-class content creators to a focus of ridicule.

Introduction

In May 2020, CarryMinati (the official YouTube account of Ajey Nagar) uploaded a YouTube video called "YouTube Versus TikTok", which was promptly taken down. There, Nagar was responding to a video by Amir Siddiqui, a TikTok creator, where Siddiqui points out that YouTubers directly copy content from TikTok creators, use it in their videos, and label it as cringe. In his response, Nagar constantly refers to Siddiqui as "beti" (or daughter) that emasculates and infantilizes the larger community of TikTok content creators. This is emblematic of the kind of response that influencers and consumers alike have towards the content labelled as "cringe". [1]

The Government of India, on 29 June 2020, banned TikTok – which was largely populated by creators from marginalised socio-economic groups. The ban was celebrated by celebrities, social media influencers, and other users on social media, since it would stop creators from sharing "cringeworthy" content (Shukla). Becoming "digitally homeless", TikTok creators were forced to shift to Instagram Reels. Even today, their content continues to be perceived as 'cringe' and is regularly ridiculed on social media (Verma). Influencers with a large following, (like CarryMinati, Tanmay Bhat, TriggeredInsaan, and RawKnee Show, among others) view themselves as 'genuine' creators, and create compilations and reactions ridiculing 'cringe' creators. [2]Furthermore, there are 'cringe posting' accounts that act as repositories of 'cringe' content and repost videos from various accounts across platforms – for public trolling.

In this paper, we argue that the categorisation of content as "cringe" is influenced by the creators' caste and class identities. This is determined by the visual aesthetics of the content. 'Ghettoisation' of content, through algorithms and content guidelines, on popular social media platforms further aids in this process. When a certain category of content is labelled as 'cringe', it becomes an impediment for creators from a lower socio-economic status. Their content does not get monetary compensation that is at par with elite influencers. Then, while content creation turns into work for elite influencers over time, for others who create 'cringe' content, it is restricted as an avenue

[1]At one point, Nagar says: "Tujhse zyada mard toh Deepak Kalal lagta hai". Deepak Kalal is an actor, who regularly went viral in 2021, for "cross-gender humour" (Wotpost).

[2]See: Rawknee Show. "BYE TIKTOK CRINGE | TIKTOK BANNED IN INDIA | RAWKNEE", YouTube. `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kel9VJJjiQ`. Towards the end of this video, the YouTuber makes a distinction between "genuine creators" and those who create "cringe content". While the video itself is a great site of analysis for who are cringe creators, this distinction clearly shows the hierarchy we aim to study

of self-expression. This paper attempts to explore how social factors make content creation work for some and 'fun' for others.

Methodology

We surveyed popular Instagram accounts that act as repositories for "cringe" content. In this paper, we analyse the attitudinal and behavioural responses to the material present on these accounts, by sifting through content posted from March 2022 to March 2023. We primarily focus on Instagram accounts including, but not limited to, @emoboisofindia, @cringepostingsindiya, @reptiles.of.kurla, @cringeboisofindiya, @cringegirlsofindiya, and @tiktokcringe.pop.[3] In our analysis, we have studied the patterns of the content available in terms of their visual and contextual material. Furthermore, we have analysed the intentions behind the curation of these repository accounts through the means of an interview with the curator of @cringegirlsofindiya.

Discussion

How Content is Labelled 'Cringe'

As social media platforms become centred around images and videos, non-verbal cues tend to be increasingly important in communications. Visual aesthetics communicate "meaningful" messages to the user (Yang et. al. 2). These messages include information that individuals use to make judgements about attributes of persons (including class and caste), through "mental shortcuts" — or heuristics (3). In heuristic decision-making processes, the brain tends to connect visual cues with prior knowledge to fill the gaps in one's consciousness. Visual heuristics, thus, can be understood as a cognitive process that uses visual aesthetics to make decisions. While these decisions can be about a range of things, we are particularly interested in their "attribute-substitution" role for personal identity (3). We apply the concept of visual heuristics to content popularly labelled as 'cringe', to understand inherent social biases that contribute to such categorisations.

[3]The names of these accounts are themselves indicative of caste and class bias. For instance, @reptiles.of.kurla is based on a sub-urban location in Mumbai, called Kurla, which is a ghetto associated with Muslims, and "native fisher folk and farmers" who converted to Christianity (Hakim). Further, by equating certain sects to animals, there is a clear attempt to degrade them.

Visual heuristics contribute to the process of virality and labelling of content. While content creators seek to emulate upper-class and upper-caste influencers, visual and auditory cues indicate the actual class status of the creator to the consumer. Heuristic cognitive processes connect the dots between the pre-existing notions of 'cringe' content creators with these audio-visual cues, ultimately dictating the category such content will fall under. Visual cues of cringe content include quality, colour palette, background, and personal aesthetics of its creator, while auditory cues are usually type of music, choice of language and words, accent, and audio quality of the content.

Videos categorised as 'cringe' usually tend to be lower in quality, have borders, filters, or frames. Since access to equipment that would allow for higher quality videos is expensive, creators from marginalised socioeconomic backgrounds are usually unable to have access to it. Their videos tend to have a unique style, replete with filters and lower quality of graphics (or computer graphic imagery). Then, the quality and editing of the video becomes an important heuristic cue to indicate the class status of the creator.

The background of these videos are similarly indicative of the individual's socioeconomic status. 'Cringe' creators shoot their material in public spaces. In Delhi, popular spots for filming for Reels include Connaught Place, because of the 'cosmopolitan' aesthetic — an attempt to emulate the upper-class influencers whose aesthetics rule platforms like Instagram. Some content creators argue that material shot at home "does not do well" compared to videos filmed publicly (Desai). At the same time, creators whose content is filmed in public are also labelled 'cringe' (Verma). Then, the background of videos is an important visual cue of a person's class status.

***Table 1**: Non-exhaustive list of visual cues*

Quality	Lower quality video Black borders Filters and frames in the video
Personal Aesthetics	Flamboyantly coloured hair and hairstyles Usually darker skin colour Clothing that is either traditional or not trendy Bright makeup
Background	Public spaces and events, like markets, metro, monuments, roads, weddings, etc. Interior design of the house
Colour Palette	Higher contrast Brighter colours

The most prominent visual cue is the person's appearance. Creators who deviate from the norm tend to be at the centre of 'cringe' content. Usually, creators from lower classes and castes have flamboyant hair colours, wear flashy clothing, and bright makeup. This kind of aesthetic is closely associated with a recent rise in income, and indicates a lack in refinement and cultural capital. This may further appear to the viewer as a sign of insecurity in wealth or the lack of class. Then, visual heuristics suggest that contents created by such individuals must be 'cringe'.[4] Similarly, queer persons typically feature on these accounts, as they deviate from societal norms. These accounts regularly troll men doing makeup and dressing in a traditionally feminine manner calling them 'manly' ironically. Consistently in these accounts, we find an emasculation of men different from the norm. For example, on a video of a man putting on makeup, we found a comment that urged the curator of the account to post better content, and criticising them for posting content that features 'hijda' (a slur used frequently for transgender persons).

In contrast to these perceptions, the popular imagination of an influencer thus becomes a cisgender, heterosexual person from a higher socioeconomic status. Others who deviate from the norm struggle to fit that definition, and often find themselves being tagged as 'cringe'. The response to such content becomes further exaggerated when the creators are 'different' from

[4]In the aforementioned video by CarryMinati, he points out that all 'cringe' TikTok creators look a certain way. He makes derogatory remarks about their appearance, stating that they have "tili jaisa badan aur mombati jaise baal" (translation: their bodies resemble matchsticks with flames on their heads).

Figure 24.0.1: Screenshot from a video of a man putting on makeup, posted on @emoboisofindia.
Translation: "If I had to see hijdas (slur for transgender people), then I would not have followed you. Post the kind of content you used to post earlier, it was great".

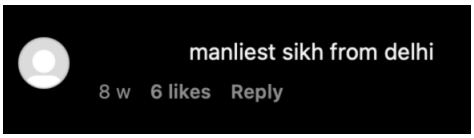


Figure 24.0.2: Screenshot from @cringeboisofindiya, 8 weeks ago, on a post about a Sikh man sitting on a scooter in a 'feminine' way.

the upper classes, in more than one way — different-bodied (disabled, fat, or non-cis), geographic location (rural or non-metropolitan citizens, especially from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh), language (speakers of regional languages, accented Hindi or English) or age (older folks).

Table 2: *Non-exhaustive list of auditory cues*

Quality	Lower quality of audio
Language	Hindi or regional languages Incorrect grammar while speaking English
Accent	Prominent local or regional accent

Apart from visual heuristics, auditory cues also contribute to the process of labelling content as 'cringe'. Along with a lower quality of audio, usually the creators of 'cringe' content speak in Hindi or regional languages. When they do speak in English, their grammar is incorrect. Their local or regional accent is prominent. The language and accents utilised often indicate the class and caste status of individuals (Errington 10). Then, using these as cues, heuristics contribute to the process of marking content with language of this kind as 'cringe'. These accents and language become sites of ridicule. Videos of persons talking in 'broken English' fill these accounts. One such video features a man saying a motivational quote, in 'broken' English, with subtitles that feature incorrect spellings. The comment section of the video ridiculing his pronunciation, grammar, and accent.

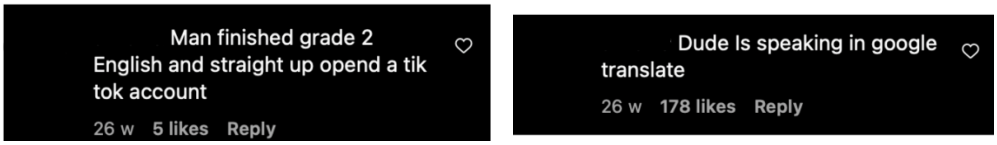


Figure 24.0.3: Screenshots from a video of a man speaking in grammatically incorrect English, from @emoboisofindia.

Captions and comments on 'cringe-posting' accounts constantly make fun of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. In popular culture, Bihar and Biharis have come to represent backwardness and "dirtiness" (Kumar). On these accounts, for consumers and curators alike, Bihar works as a placeholder for lower castes and classes, given the association between them. We see, then, the use of heuristic decision-making by both parties in categorising such content as 'cringe', because of its association with identity markers.

Figure 24.0.4: 'What is even up in Bihar (Ohio)?', caption from @emoboisofindia on a video of a disabled man and a woman dancing.

Figure 24.0.5: "Average day of Bihari after not getting a labour job", comment from a video on @emoboisofindia, indicating that 'Bihari' is a placeholder for the class or caste status of persons in the video.

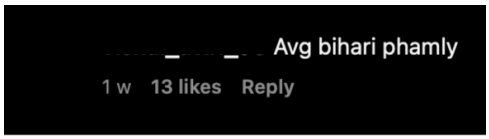


Figure 24.0.6: "Avg Bihari phamly", comment from a video on @emoboisofindia. The use of 'phamly', instead of family, hints at the stereotype that Biharis speak in an accented tongue, indicating a relationship between auditory cues and class status.

Figure 24.0.7: "Avg Bihari phamly", comment from a video on @emoboisofindia. The use of 'phamly', instead of family, hints at the stereotype that Biharis speak in an accented tongue, indicating a relationship between auditory cues and class status.

The popular response from consumers on the platform is to ridicule the identity of the persons in the video. Then, we find a consistent use of casteist (and racist) slurs in response to the content. Creators of cringe content are labelled as 'chappri', a slur traditionally used against caste groups that typically repaired roofs (Monga). This word has now come to be associated with anyone making what is popularly deemed 'cringe' content.

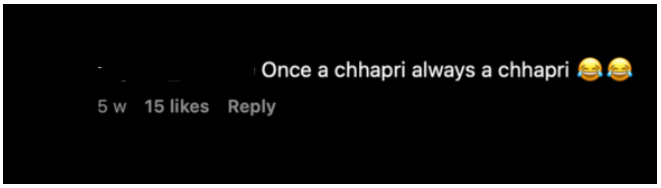


Figure 24.0.8: Screenshots from a video calling the creator 'chappri', a casteist slur.

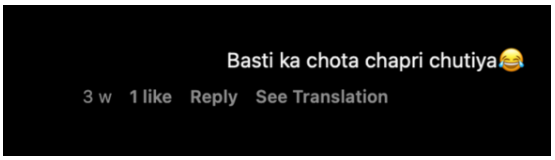


Figure 24.0.9: Screenshot of a comment cursing the creator. The comment calls them 'chutiya' (an abusive Hindi word), referring to them with a casteist slur 'chapri', and clearly locating their class status 'basti' (or slum).
Translation: "A small chapri chutiya from the slum".

Figure 24.0.10: Screenshot of the hashtags used by @reptiles.of.kurla to promote their content. While some hashtags contain the words 'chapri', others also make mention of a word 'nibba' which is a modified version of the racist slur used against black people.

Through our discussion of heuristics, we find that there is a close association between the identity of the creators of content and identification of content as 'cringe'. Visual and auditory cues contribute to demarcation of certain content as 'cringe', since they signal to the viewer the relative class and caste status of the creator. Those from the lower castes and classes, then, are considered creators of 'cringe', while others come to be labelled 'influencers'.

Ghettoisation of Online Spaces

As Pierre Bourdieu argues, 'good' taste is based on social distinction. It is defined by different factions of the upper-classes and maintained for their benefit. The hierarchy exists through a process of differentiation from other 'lower' kinds of tastes, which are inevitably associated with people with lower cultural capital (257-95). To that effect, labelling content as 'cringe' is a result of social distinctions and not qualitative analysis. Consequently, elite influencers and consumers "[preserve] their own privilege and the cultural status quo" (Geary 2). Thus, content creators are restricted to their status in the social hierarchy, as caste and class influence virality and consumption.

Online platforms, moreover, replicate the social hierarchies present in the offline world due to biases in people, data, and algorithms that form them. Short-video platforms like Instagram use a collaborative filtering algorithm

that aids in the outcasting of content as 'cringe'. Collaborative filtering algorithm works by constructing user profiles based on the user's explicit rating of a media through shares and likes and implicit rating generated by their viewing time or clicks. The user profile is regularly updated to be up to date with the user's evolution of online activity. Recommendations for the user are then shown based on the taste of profiles similar to their user profile (Stinson).

Since taste is largely informed by the social distinctions present within different classes, there emerges a 'homogenising effect', wherein people belonging to similar caste and class backgrounds have similar feeds. Since Instagram is dominated by people from affluent socioeconomic backgrounds, the algorithm works to promote the elite aesthetics while sidelining the minority community. The segregation on the online sphere developed as a result of the biases inherent in the collaborative filtering algorithm. These social media algorithms actively make some videos popular due to their alignment with the taste of the majority community; while there are other forms of media which are specific to the taste of some users, and are limited to their feed. Due to the biases inherent in collaborative algorithms, users who belong to marginalised groups are sidelined by the preferences of the majority (Stinson).

This 'homogenising' effect and more so the segregation of online spaces, is similar to the caste-based segregation of spaces present in India (Verma). This segregation develops into ghettoisation in an online environment – such that the content created by people from marginalised socio-economic backgrounds are restricted to the people within the community, while other 'elite' consumers continue to ridicule them when these kinds of 'cringe' content show up on their feed once in a while.

With a recent change in algorithm, Instagram has announced guidelines that restricts active recommendation of reels that are blurry, bear watermarks or logos, or have a border around them (Carman). Through the enforcement of quality aesthetics on these short-video platforms, content-creators from marginalised caste and class backgrounds – who are unable to access resources to produce such aesthetics – are further outcasted in these ghettoised online spaces.

Even within ghettoised online spaces, content is constantly shadow-banned by the platform, therefore creators from marginalised communities are not as visible within their own spaces.[5] Furthermore, they are not 'verified'

[5]Content gets shadow banned when it isn't outrightly removed from the social media plat-

despite having a substantial number of followers. For instance, Shivani Kumari, a content creator with more than two and half million followers on Instagram, remains unverified on the platform. Instagram's announcement on verification claims that "verification signals authenticity and notability" (Lancaster). However, even after Shivani Kumar has a sizable following, Instagram has not deemed her account notable enough to be verified (Shaik). Additionally, the lack of verification and thus authenticity has led to creation of various imposter accounts of Shivani Kumari. This also hinders the ability of content creators, like Shivani Kumari, to get monetised for their work, since their work can be replicated by others.

While Instagram community guidelines explicitly prohibit posting videos that the user has no right to share, accounts (such as the ones surveyed here) tend to post videos of smaller creators and gain large followings through it. The curator of @cringegirlsofindiya when interviewed commented that they posted videos found through Reddit, YouTube, and Instagram accounts, either by them or their followers, but do not own these videos. Their account currently has more than ten thousand followers. Despite being in a clear violation of Instagram community guidelines, these accounts are allowed to exist and flourish. Apart from copying content, these accounts constantly feature slurs and mentions of child trafficking that the Instagram algorithm does not censor, in spite of guidelines which disallow such content.

Figure 24.0.11: Screenshot of a caption from a video of kids from a lower socioeconomic class performing a rap song. The caption and the comment section is filled with mentions of wanting to sell the kids.

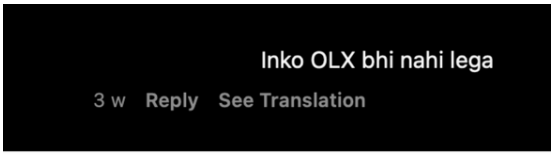


Figure 24.0.12: 'Inko OLX bhi nahi lega'.
(Translation: Even OLX (a popular reselling website) will also not take them)

form, but rather strategically hidden from users on the platform. See also: Salty Net's Report on Algorithmic Bias in Content Policing on Instagram, `https://saltyworld.net/algorithmicbiasreport-2/`.

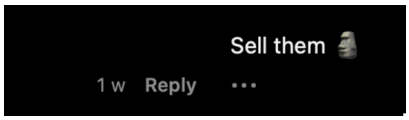


Figure 24.0.14: Picture 3: 'Sell them', referring to the children in the video.

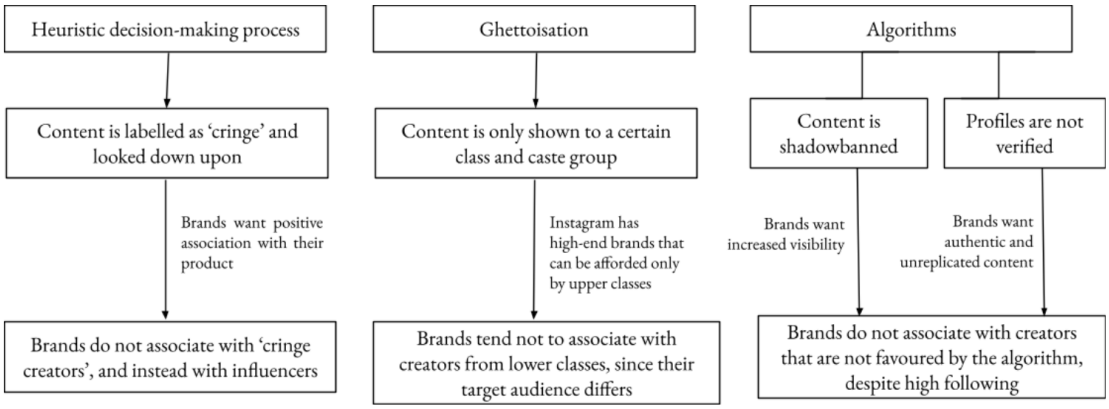
Figure 24.0.13: 'Child trafficking legal ho toh batao'.
(Translation: Tell me if child trafficking is legal.)

Even then, however, Instagram does not regularly censor these accounts. They gain massive following and appreciation on content that other individuals make, while the original creators find it hard to gain recognition. In fact, @emoboisofindia has started another advertising and marketing account (under the name @emopromomanager), wherein the curator takes money to push content on their original page.[6] These accounts, thus, actively benefit (in material terms) from stealing content and gaining such a sizable following.

Monetisation

In this section, we suggest that a possible outcome of ghettoisation of content and heuristics is the restriction of monetary benefits available to creators of 'cringe'. Instagram provides the following opportunities for content creators to monetize their content: sponsored posts, affiliate marketing, paid promotions, product sales, and ads. However, there exist several barriers to entry for creators considered 'cringe' on such platforms. Daniela Dib from Rest of World reports that the "real money" on social media platforms lies in influencer marketing, rather than the monetisation of views. While 'cringe' content creators tend to have the latter, their access to brand work is limited by various factors (like the ones discussed above).

[6] `https://www.instagram.com/emopromomanager/`. Accessed March 2023.



***Graph 1**: Flowchart depicting how monetisation may be negatively affected by the creation and perpetuation of 'cringe' by consumers and algorithms*

As shown above, content labelled as 'cringe' is ridiculed and looked down upon. Brands tend towards positive associations for their products to influence purchase intention of customers, given the heuristic decision-making at play. They then disprove of 'cringe' creators, restricting monetary compensation. Since content of creators from lower castes and classes tends to be classified as 'cringe' more frequently, preference in monetisation by brands is given to the upper castes and classes.

Influencers for brands are shortlisted based on the number of followers, kind of audience, and rates of engagements (Sharma 2022). Instagram Reels tend to have advertisements for more "premium" brands, which can only be afforded by upper classes (Sharma 2021). Due to ghettoisation of content, the target audience of these brands and the 'cringe' creators differs. Further, customers' purchase intentions are influenced by homophily, or the tendency to bond with those similar to oneself (Kim and Kim). Then, brands tend not to prefer creators from lower classes or castes. Since brands want higher visibility for their products, they want to collaborate with influencers who have higher engagement rates. As creators of 'cringe' content are regularly shadow-banned, they do not have the same rates of engagement as other influencers. Then, marginalised creators are less likely to be picked up by brands. Moreover, visibility of content also reduces due to ghettoisation of content. Thus, the treatment of 'cringe' creators by algorithms could lead to lesser brand engagement than influencers. In the absence of verification of profiles, brands may steer away from 'cringe' creators because they may be unsure which profile is correct. For example, Puneet Superstar — a widely followed creator on Instagram, popularly deemed cringe — has several profiles with slight variations in username, the same profile photo, and similar bios. There, it becomes unclear which of these accounts is authentic and can

be approached.

In such situations, creators shift to other ways of earning. Puneet Superstar, for instance, publicly displays his phone number, asking people to send him requests on WhatsApp to wish their friends and family on special occasions. He then charges a certain amount for these requests. Local platforms like Moj and Josh also provide creators money for creating within the app (Bhat).

Future literature needs to look into the role of influencer management agencies in this phenomenon. More attention needs to be paid to how such agencies restrict their services to a particular category of individuals (who belong to higher socioeconomic classes), and thereby hampering the capability of individuals from lower classes and castes to monetise their work. Quantitative analysis of the frequency of brand deals and the amount of payment can also provide important insights into how labelling content 'cringe' affects monetisation.

Conclusion

This study analysed the attitudinal and behavioural responses to the content posted on Instagram accounts that showcase 'cringe' material. We surveyed several popular Instagram accounts and analysed the patterns of the visual and contextual material. Utilising the concept of heuristic decision-making, we argue that inherent social biases contribute to the categorization of content as 'cringe'. These heuristic cues include visual cues like quality, colour palette, background, and personal aesthetics of its creator, while auditory cues are usually the type of music, choice of language and words, accent, and audio quality of the content. We argue that creators who deviate from the norm tend to be at the centre of 'cringe' content, and at the receiving end of ridicule from consumers. Creators from lower classes and castes, queer and transgender persons, and disabled and old people form a vast majority of the creators posted on these accounts. Casteist and racist slurs, emasculation of men, and comments ridiculing the accent and language of the creator form popular response to such content.

This classification of content as 'cringe' is influenced by one's own ideas of taste. Taste, as highlighted by Bourdieu, is embedded in social distinctions of class. One's collective identity through taste, alongside the collaborative filtering algorithm of the social media platforms, causes ghettoisation of online spaces based on caste. Content by marginalised creators is shown

only to certain classes and castes. Further, their content is regularly shadow-banned and profiles go unverified, despite a large following. This treatment of influencers by the algorithm may increase difficulty in monetisation of content for 'cringe' creators.

Influencers for brands are shortlisted based on the number of followers, kind of audience, and rates of engagement. This paper suggests that ghettoisation of content and heuristics, then, negatively impact monetisation of creators of 'cringe' on Instagram. Such creators face barriers in brand work due to the ridicule attached with their content. Since the content made by creators from lower castes and classes tends to be classified as 'cringe' more frequently, preference in monetisation by brands is given to the upper castes and classes. So, while influencers from upper castes and classes gain remuneration for their work more easily, smaller creators whose content is considered 'cringe' must find other avenues for creating wealth.

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CHAPTER

TWENTYFIVE

CONSUMING CRINGE: A SENSORIAL UNDERSTANDING OF HUMOROUS MEN ON INSTAGRAM

Ananay Koushal
ananaykoushal23@gmail.com
MA Sociology, Jawaharlal Nehru University

The Indian social media has seen a gradual rise in cringe content post-2016, as access to the internet rapidly increased with the introduction of Jio services in the broader context of technonationalism in India. This position paper focuses on the emergent "humorous masculinity" in the form of viral meme content on Instagram Reels after the ban of TikTok in India post-Indo-China border tensions. This paper hopes to examine how marginalized content creators like Puneet Kumar (Puneet Superstar on Instagram) are resisting the segregated online space that mirrors Indian society by using humor in an ironic and subversive manner. To understand the perspectives of cringe culture in India, this paper will use the Bourdieusian framework [9] of digital capital and analyze content following Sarah Pink's interventions in the sensorial digital ethnography [13] within a broad framework of the theory of senses.

Introduction

The internet can be imagined as many things as we live terminally online lives, but one of them is posting and consuming 'cringe.' There might have been a moment in our (online) lives when we felt embarrassed or awkward seeing a piece of content. 'Cringe,' if it has become popular as a meme, a form of entertainment in terms of music videos, and an immensely cutting insult, has become an engaging phenomenon in navigating and shaping the online ways of being. Dahl [6] in her book emphasizes that "the moments that make us cringe are when we are yanked out of our perspective, and we can suddenly see ourselves from somebody else's point of view." For instance, a reader of this paper might be 'cringing hard' while thinking about the theme of this paper. A phenomenon like 'cringe' takes many forms, but in India, it had its roots in the roast videos on YouTube content creators like Carry Minati on the content pieces of creators like Taher Shah, Dhinchak Pooja, and Deepak Kalal, who popularized cringe pop. More recently, this has transitioned to social media platforms that are used for self-presentation with short-form video content of TikTok and Instagram. TikTok (a short-form video application) which is now banned in India gave fame to many working-class Indian content creators from various marginalized backgrounds who had very little exposure to social media. The content on TikTok and now Instagram Reels is considered 'cringe' by the privileged users of the applications as people from marginalized backgrounds at various intersections take up space with their Bourdieusian sense of aesthetics and 'taste' in doing mundane things of leisure on the internet.

Aim and Research Questions

This paper analyzes the sociological perspectives of cringe culture on the Indian internet by employing sensory interventions to analyze media trends [13]. For this, the paper focuses on the emergent marginalized masculinities in social media trends, popularly called the 'Emobois of India' as "humorous masculinity" [1], as opposed to the 'normative' concept of hegemonic masculinity by RW Connell on the internet. This paper tries to investigate the social processes involved in the transformation of content made by marginalized social media creators as 'memetic' and 'relatable' for social media consumers at a privileged position by using concepts of sociological self-presentation and the emergent 'vernacular creativity' on internet spaces.

This paper has tried to do a sensory analysis of cringe content based on a case study profile of Puneet Superstar, a popular 'cringe' social media influencer on Instagram currently with 297K followers and multiple backup accounts, to argue how these marginalized content creators without any Bourdieusian notion of digital capital are resisting the upper-caste/class-dominated spaces of the Indian internet (especially Instagram) in subversive way. This would bring us to the main argument that this paper explores: Does the act of 'cringing' on social media content reinforce and legitimize existing power relations, or does it provide a way for marginalized influencers to subvert them? This argument has emerged from the broader framework of superiority theory of humour. [1]

Related Work

Social media has helped to forge an alternative sociality among Indians.[12] The past work focuses on 'platformization' of everyday life in India which mirrors the segregated offline space. [11,12,14,19,21] The caste and class based discriminatory attitudes towards working class social media users, especially on TikTok have been extensively documented.[21] There has also been research on the erasure of working-class desires after the TikTok ban. [14] Furthermore, previous studies have highlighted TikTok's role in promoting anti-caste assertions and the formation of Dalit identity [16], as well as Instagram Reels as a space for emerging modern casteism [19]. Another study contends that TikTok promotes professionalism and entrepreneurial citizenship as well as "daily acts of resistance" as space for "vernacular creativity." [11] The current paper focuses on the virality of marginalised male influencers through a lens of humorous masculinity and reading Instagram Reels as a memetic text leading to the subversion of the hegemonic online spaces.

Memetic Transformation of the Indian Social Media

The sudden ban of TikTok in India resulted in a significant shift in the Indian social media landscape, particularly on Instagram. Previously, Instagram was focused on visual aesthetics and personal branding, which made it feel like an expensive cafe for the burgeoning middle-class population in

Indian society, now appears to be memetic. Borelli and Moore [4] suggest that TikTok served as a digital commons, a space where "difference" was irrelevant because all users had to do to belong was join TikTok, learn how to produce a video, and then utilize it according to their abilities and aesthetic preferences. In contrast, Instagram was more focused on curation and required a certain level of digital cultural capital, which Ignatow [9] describes as the knowledge, awareness, and drive to use technology adeptly. Digital cultural capital remained a requirement, in addition to financial investment, which users believed was necessary to effectively switch from TikTok to Instagram Reel and other applications in the wake of the ban.

The research on Internet memes and the new short-form applications like TikTok suggests that such platforms based on the concepts of virality and immediate spread of information can be read as a memetic text [22] and further this internet meme can be seen as an extension of platform's infrastructure. Here, memetic refers to the theoretical and empirical framework that studies the replication, spread and evolution of memes [13]. Features of short-form video applications are based on the structures of imitation and instant replication with accessible icons and guides to remove any hassle while making content. This is how applications with the likes of TikTok became popular among the working class population of India boosting online solidarity, micro-celebrity notion and a new creative economy although they also faced online harassment and ridicule from more privileged social media users. Surprisingly, this cringe factor in the videos of working-class creators has proved to be subversive and this memetic content comes off as "relatable" to the consumers of privileged classes. The memes on the internet now have a more complex and speculative meaning due to this relatability intent, invoking a sense of identity in the observer. A very recent meme history maintains the idea through the continued use of formats and linguistic cliches like 'it me,' 'us,' 'same' and "shaking my head" (smh). Relatable memes can maintain a sort of cohesiveness in "collective being," or a collective memory that can never be entirely encapsulated since it is impossible to zoom out far enough to see it all at once. The relatability of memes allows for a sense of collective ownership and the potential for appropriation and interpretation by individuals of any social class, but marginalized people's cultural and affective work is often ignored and under-compensated online. [7] Puneet Superstar's content is shared and becomes memetic through this process of ironic 'relatability' which could be studied not only through the gaze but also other senses, running in line with WJT MItchell's notion that

all media are mixed media and to do away with visual exclusivity.[13]

Humorous Men and Social Media Stars

This paper begins by introducing the idea that posting on social media not only involves sensory perceptions of others, but also categorizes them as "cringe" or "other" and involves mocking the perceived cringe users based on acquired taste and aesthetic values through the process of curation, as well as the habitus of social media users. “Laughing” and “Cringing” on others might reinstate as well as validate the exiting power relations, often through the dominant gaze and in our case, its the hegemonic male gaze on the marginalised men. [1] For the purpose of this paper, the focus is on the emergent “humorous masculinity” with the rise in the viral “meme content” in the memetic format that Instagram Reels adopted after the ban of TikTok in India, rendering working class creators “digitally homeless”. [20] There was a virality in the notion that TikTokers being “cringe” and Reelers being “creators” since the very adoption of these applications suggesting a deep class/caste divide which has empirical grounds. The argument which states that cringing on others reinstates the power relations in society is reflected in the ideas of Deleuze’s society of control in which videos that seem deviant in some ways become memetic and viral on social media, cringe content as a cultural expression of control [3].

This paper argues against this notion of cringe content as a cultural expression of control by bringing the sensorial understanding of humour as an everyday resistance in the form of viral cringe videos of Puneet Superstar which in turn threaten the present positions of power in society. The level of ‘cringeworthy’ determines the memetic and viral nature of the spreadable content piece. This could be categorised as consumable stereotypification as it highlights the notion of incomplete masculinity which targets, the traits of orality, speech and accent as well as well as overall demeanour. These humorous men on meme pages are categorised as “Emo Bois” by popular meme pages like @emoboisofindia on Instagram in an ironic sense as Urban dictionary defines emo boy as “a guy, often between the ages of 20 and 35, whose melancholy temperament is deeply ingrained inside a policy of extremely modern attire and self-apologetic ideologies."

Recently, the admins of this famous meme page were featured on Vogue India as “curatorial genius” for bringing the “whacky” content [18] on the Instagram feeds which are aesthetically curated and mainly the feature focused on their "designer drips". The intent of the admins might have been different, but they surely pushed forward the idea of cringe influencers who are helping in the gradual loss of monopoly of cultural capital among the privileged social media users of the country. The digs at "kothi-bangla people” and bringing forth realities of unemployment in India through the categorisation of “nalla-berozgaars” in his content; cringe content has enabled working class men like Puneet Superstar to take up space in hegemonic space with his humorous masculinity and get viral with his content and becoming “relatable” to the dominated sections, presenting an ironic way of subverting the online segregated space with humour.

His content which is described as a shocker art [20] ranges from shouting under a Gurgaon bridge to distributing food to the unprivileged children distancing from the hegemonic masculinity to create his own genre of humorous masculinity. The content is replicated and shared in different socio-political contexts by social media users. Puneet’s Journey from Puneet Kumar to Lord Puneet in the Indian social media makes an interesting case study making way for marginalised men to take up space in a segregated online world. Sangeet Kumar [10] points out that Indian "viral culture" of videos, memes, and sites is establishing "a new language of critique" by deploying the motifs of parody and satire. These viral videos, spreadable memes, and parody websites, for example, reproduce and circulate cultural texts, creating a framework of involvement among new audiences from the marginalised communities.

Conclusion

Puneet Superstar is re-narrativizing the moral panic around content curation through memefication of daily life activities successfully on a platform where curation is seen as a prerequisite for uploading media. Puneet subverts the notion of the hegemonic Indian male on the internet through varied forms of self-expression that are considered humorous and create a situation of relatability for the users with digital capital as they reshare his content. His "silly fun" videos on being unemployed at home with romantic 90s background songs are a subversive way of sharing collective anxieties of youth in

India among other subversive narratives through lip-synced self-deprecating humor. Expression through video is very easy to navigate for working-class creators like Puneet Superstar as his content is received multisensorially. The random screams in his daily documentation of life which he calls "demanding videos" are seen as cathartic to GenZ social media users who are frustrated by the constant urge to curate their lives online and as Puneet rants about his parents' anger on his unemployment. By intentionally embracing "awkward moments," cringe content makers like Puneet Superstar reject the notion that social media should be a curated, polished, and bland version of oneself. Puneet Superstar's content could also function against the corporate or institutional control over social media content by flouting the algorithmic expectations of Instagram reels by posting his "textured and complex" daily life multiple times a day through various accounts. Based on the above analysis of Puneet Superstar's social media presence, this paper concludes that the act of "cringing" on social media offers a means for marginalized influencers to subvert existing power relations.

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Part IV

Glossary

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TWENTYSEVEN

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