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CHAPTER  
**TWELVE**

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FOLLOWING (F)INSTAGRAMS: DELINEATING  
SOCIAL BOUNDARIES ONLINE

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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].

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, *fnstas* 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.

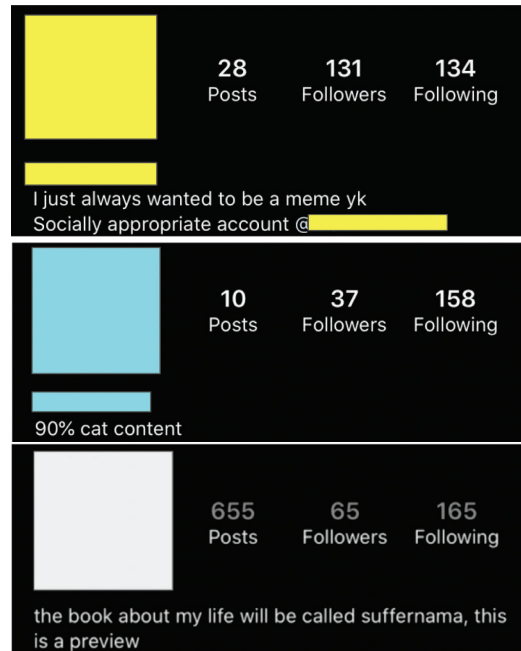
## Research Method and Findings

The primary research was conducted in the context of Indian Millennials and GenZ aged between 17-38 years old ( $\bar{x} = 23$  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 <sup>1</sup>, “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 <sup>2</sup> 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 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 *rinastas* / *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’.

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<sup>1</sup>Name changed to maintain privacy.

<sup>2</sup>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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