FOURTEEN

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

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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

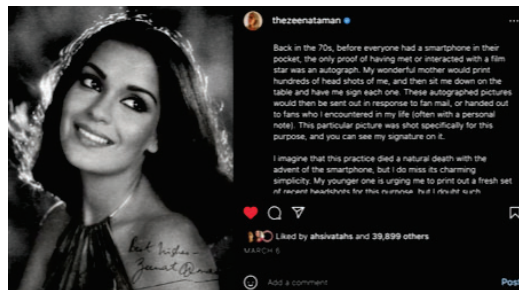**Figure 14.0.3:** ASCI's report on influencer archetypes

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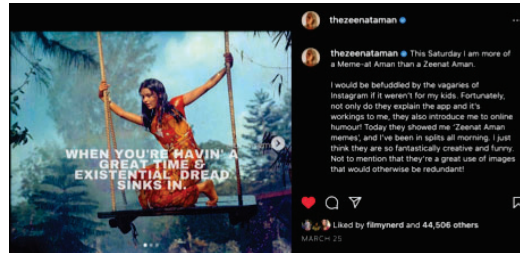
Figure 14.0.5: Zeenat Amaan's post of her image remediated as a meme

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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