

THAT'S CRINGE: HOW AESTHETICS AND
ALGORITHMS AFFECT MONETIZATION

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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

¹At 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).

²See: Rawknee Show. “BYE TIKTOK CRINGE | TIKTOK BANNED IN INDIA | RAWKNEE”, YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ke19VJJjiQ>. 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, @cringe-postingsindiya, @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 judgments 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.

³The 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

⁴In 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).

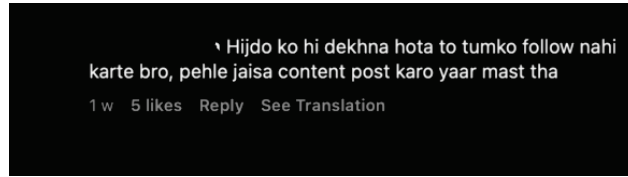


Figure 24.0.1: Screenshot from a video of a man putting on makeup, posted on @emoboisofindia.

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”.

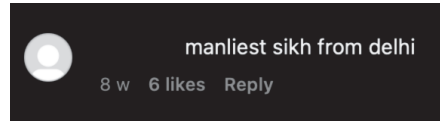


Figure 24.0.2: Screenshot from @cringeboisofindiya, 8 weeks ago, on a post about a Sikh man sitting on a scooter in a ‘feminine’ way.

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.

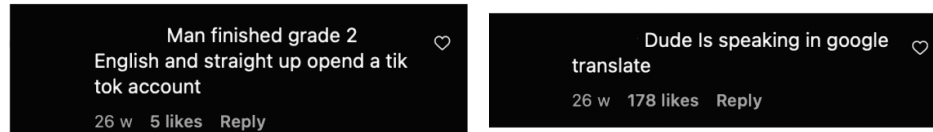


Figure 24.0.3: Screenshots from a video of a man speaking in grammatically incorrect English, from @emoboisofindia.

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.

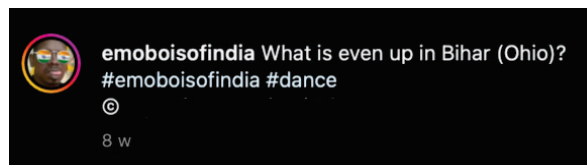


Figure 24.0.4: ‘What is even up in Bihar (Ohio)?’, caption from @emoboisofindia on a video of a disabled man and a woman dancing.

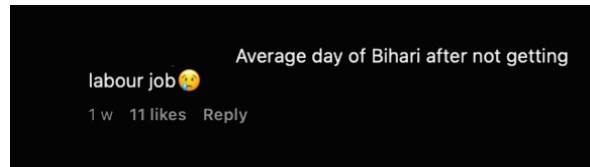


Figure 24.0.5: “Average day of Bihari after not getting a labour job”, comment from a video on @emoboisofindia, indicating that ‘Bihari’ is a placeholder for the class or caste status of persons in the video.

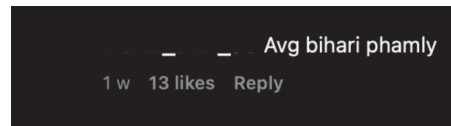


Figure 24.0.6: “Avg Bihari phamly”, comment from a video on @emoboisofindia. The use of ‘phamly’, instead of family, hints at the stereotype that Biharis speak in an accented tongue, indicating a relationship between auditory cues and class status.

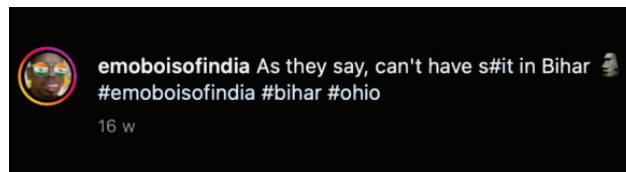


Figure 24.0.7: “Avg Bihari phamly”, comment from a video on @emoboisofindia. The use of ‘phamly’, instead of family, hints at the stereotype that Biharis speak in an accented tongue, indicating a relationship between auditory cues and class status.

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.

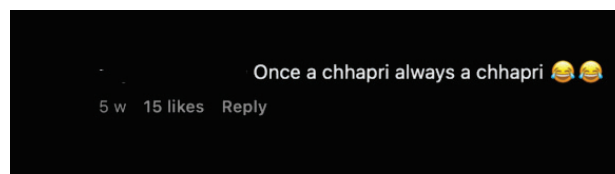


Figure 24.0.8: Screenshots from a video calling the creator ‘chappri’, a casteist slur.

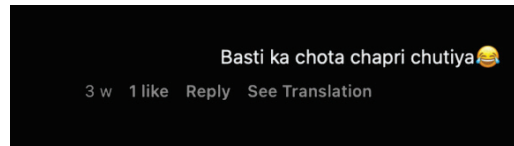


Figure 24.0.9: Screenshot of a comment cursing the creator. The comment calls them ‘chutiya’ (an abusive Hindi word), referring to them with a casteist slur ‘chapri’, and clearly locating their class status ‘basti’ (or slum). Translation: “A small chapri chutiya from the slum”.

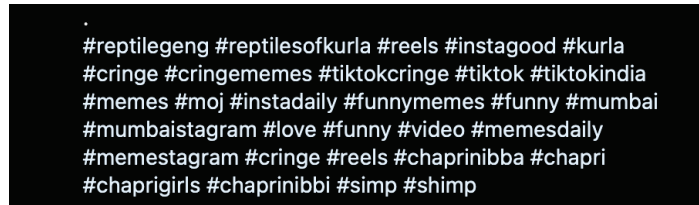


Figure 24.0.10: Screenshot of the hashtags used by @reptiles.of.kurla to promote their content. While some hashtags contain the words ‘chapri’, others also make mention of a word ‘nibba’ which is a modified version of the racist slur used against black people.

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’

⁵Content 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.

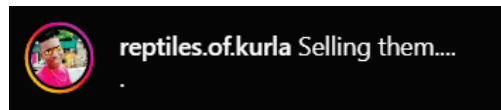


Figure 24.0.11: Screenshot of a caption from a video of kids from a lower socioeconomic class performing a rap song. The caption and the comment section is filled with mentions of wanting to sell the kids.

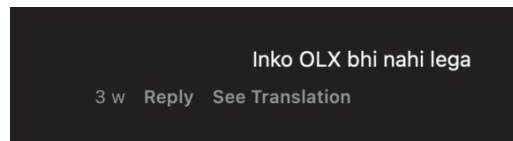


Figure 24.0.12: ‘Inko OLX bhi nahi lega’.
(Translation: Even OLX (a popular reselling website) will also not take them)

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/>.

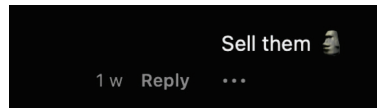


Figure 24.0.14: Picture 3: ‘Sell them’, referring to the children in the video.



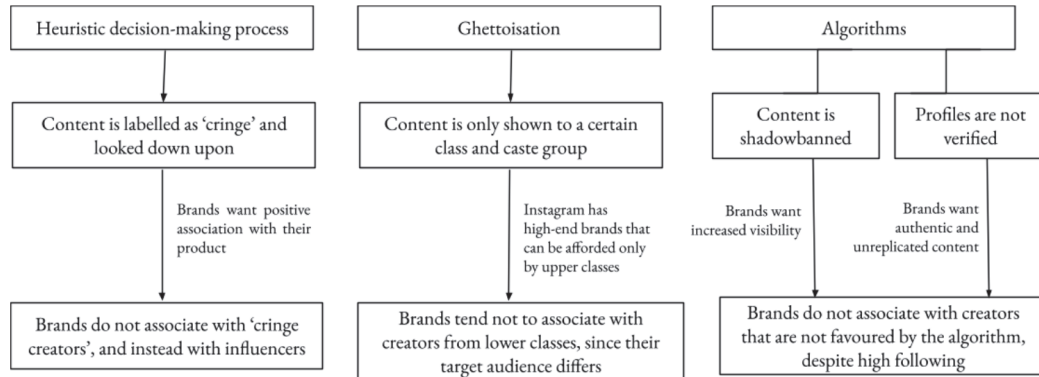
Figure 24.0.13: ‘Child trafficking legal ho toh batao’.
(Translation: Tell me if child trafficking is legal.)

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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