
CHAPTER

TWENTYFIVE

CONSUMING CRINGE: A SENSORIAL
UNDERSTANDING OF HUMOROUS MEN ON
INSTAGRAM

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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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