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Social Media Influencers and the Construction of Cultural Identity

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ABSTRACT: This study delves into how social media influencers shape the construction of cultural identity among Indian millennials and considers parallels with Southeast Asia, where similar tensions between tradition and globalization keep emerging. Using qualitative content analysis, Instagram posts from selective social media influencers were examined. The analysis draws on Goffman's theory of Identity Performance and Anderson's concept of Imagined Communities, while situating findings within broader Southeast Asian digital identity contexts. Results reveal hybrid identity performances where tradition intersects with modern global aesthetics. Influencers foster imagined communities through language, traditions, symbols, and interactivity. Comparative insights suggest Indian and Southeast Asian millennials share common negotiations of cultural identity online, but with distinct nuances shaped by their regional collectivist values, religion, and local cultural traditions that they value.

KEYWORDS: Instagram influencers, cultural identity, millennials, content analysis, community building, India, Southeast Asia

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid rise of social media has transformed how cultural identity is viewed, articulated, negotiated, and performed in contemporary societies. For Indian millennials, social networking platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have become critical spaces for expressing individuality, building communities, aligning with global trends, and reinterpreting traditional cultural norms. Social media influencers, who serve as both content creators and opinion sharers, play a crucial role in shaping these evolving identities by blending their personal narratives with the broader cultural discourses. Their curated presence not only engages large audiences but also provides insight into how digital media fosters hybrid cultural identities in the modern era.

While this study focuses mainly on Indian millennials, the dynamics explored here resonate strongly with wider developments across Asia, particularly in Southeast Asia, where rapid digital adoption and youthful populations have similarly fueled the rise of influencer culture, particularly after the pandemic. Countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand are among the most active social media markets in the world, with influencers shaping lifestyle aspirations, consumer choices, and cultural expression. In both India and Southeast Asia, social media provides a platform where traditional values intersect with modern global imaginaries, allowing youth to reframe cultural identity through practices of self-presentation, branding, community engagement and making money.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Goffman's seminal work (1959) conceptualizes identity as a form of social performance, wherein individuals "stage" particular aspects of themselves in interaction with an active audience. This dramaturgical perspective is especially relevant for social media, where users actively curate and perform identities to attract and cover their followers. Instagram influencers, aware of their large and diverse audiences, engage in deliberate identity performances that strategically blend cultural markers to appeal to their followers' aspirations, expectations and sense of belonging. Individuals present themselves selectively to manage impressions and negotiate their social roles. Instagram, with its visual, audio and textual affordances, provides a stage for such performances where influencers craft identities through images, music, captions, and interactions. Individuals manage to perform in such a way that they cater to the impressions, others have of them. He also puts forth the front stage where they perform for others and the back stage where they can just be themselves. This performative act is especially salient in cultural identity construction, where symbolic markers communicate belonging, values, giving tips, sharing lifestyles, guidance and aspirations.

Intersection of Identity Performance and Community Building along with Identity Crisis, Validation, and Cyberbullying

The study integrates contemporary scholarship on identity crisis among millennials (Kumar & Singh, 2019), highlighting the existing tensions between traditional collectivist norms and modern individualism. Social media introduces a heightened need for validation, with likes, views and comments functioning as currency of social capital (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). However, these platforms also expose users to cyberbullying, which threatens identity coherence and mental well-being (Dasgupta, 2018). The framework acknowledges these dual dynamics shaping digital identity performance. With all the positive sides of social media, users also face negativities such as trolling, bullying, theft of personal data, misuse of images and videos with AI intervention, virtual manipulation, fake business or service, impersonating someone and the list goes on. This becomes a great threat to identity.

Combining these theories provides a robust lens for understanding how Instagram influencers not only perform identities but also co-create communal spaces that reinforce collective cultural identities among the viewers. This dual focus on individual agency and communal belonging helps explain the dynamics of cultural identity construction in digital spaces in the contemporary world.

Instagram Influencers as Cultural Intermediaries

Instagram influencers wield significant cultural capital, acting as entertainers, trendsetters and identity models for their followers (Abidin, 2018). They often blend local cultural motifs with global trends and aesthetics to construct hybrid identities that resonate with diverse audiences (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). For Indian millennials, such influencers provide templates for negotiating the competing demands of cultural heritage and contemporary lifestyles which becomes an adaptation from the West.

Identity Performance on Social Media

Research on identity performance in online spaces highlights the performativity inherent in curated self-presentation and creativity (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Influencers craft personas that align with specific social and cultural expectations, using visual symbols, audios, language, and interactive features to manage impressions and build trust with their audiences who look upon them for different needs. It could be to learn something or sometimes just to relieve their stress. Research shows social media as a critical space for identity experimentation, growth and performance (Marwick, 2013; Hogan, 2010). Instagram's visual emphasis facilitates symbolic communication through curated images, enabling users to present idealized or multiple selves catered for all. Influencers, in particular, play a crucial role in shaping aspirational identities and cultural trends (Abidin, 2016).

Community Building and Social Media

Social media platforms facilitate the creation of "networked publics" where communities form around shared interests, opinions and identities (Boyd, 2010). Hashtags, comments, and interactive stories enable followers to participate in dialogues, exchange of ideas, reinforcing community ties and co-constructing cultural meaning (Kozinets, 2010). In the Indian context, digital communities around cultural influencers support identity affirmation and collective belonging in the society. Online communities provide social support, love and identity validation (Baym, 2015). For Indian millennials, these communities can be essential for navigating cultural tensions, offering peer recognition and support that may not be available offline (Sharma & Khanna, 2021). However, the validation-seeking behavior linked to social media use can also end up in anxiety and self-esteem issues (Vogel et al., 2014). From the thought that people use social media to share their joy, achievements and milestones, it has become a platform where they start seeking validation from others. Counting on likes, comments and views becomes a natural instinct but sometimes it becomes too much when people become infuriated when they don't get the validation from those who are important in their life. They start praising strangers for being more supportive, while the known circle remains as silent watchers.

III. FINDINGS

Hybrid Identity Performance: Tradition Meets Modernity

Influencers frequently showcased a hybridized cultural identity by juxtaposing traditional Indian elements with contemporary global fashion and trends. For example, posts featuring influencers in sarees paired with sneakers or western-style sunglasses exemplify this blending of culture. This performance reflects millennials' negotiation of cultural heritage and modern individualism, catering to a generation confident and comfortable inhabiting multiple cultural worlds simultaneously. Influencers regularly blended traditional Indian cultural elements (sarees, festivals, regional languages) with contemporary global fashion, music, and lifestyle trends. For example, one influencer celebrated Diwali wearing a traditional saree paired with Western-style accessories, signaling modern hybrid identity.

Symbolic Use of Language and Cultural Markers

Code-switching between English and regional languages (Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam) in captions and comments signals multilingual identity performances. Hashtags such as #DesiSwag, #ProudIndian, and #MillennialVibes reinforce shared cultural narratives. Visual symbols like diya lamps during Diwali or rangoli art and enjoying other religious festive food postures cultural traditions, connecting followers to heritage while engaging in contemporary social media trends.

IV. CONCLUSION

Social media influencers in India play a crucial role in shaping millennial cultural identities by performing hybrid cultural selves and fostering engaged communities. Many take their job seriously and are solely dedicated to consistently create best content for their trusted followers. This study demonstrates that cultural identity on Instagram is not fixed but continually negotiated through audio, visual and interactive practices. In conclusion, Instagram influencers play a pivotal role in shaping Indian millennials' cultural identity construction and belonging. Through hybrid identity performances and community building, they negotiate the tensions of tradition and globalization while managing the challenges of validation, misinterpretation, backlash and cyberbullying. Despite the challenges, those who keep going forward with a thick-skin, are the ones that sustain in the digital space.

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