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# Instagram Reels: A New Space of Cultural Identity

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**Abstract:**

This study observes *Instagram* as a site of cultural identity production. Digital sites function as cultural spaces. It is particularly used by the youth to construct and contest identities. It is shaped by caste, class, gender, and regional factors. The study underlines that Instagram allows new forms of self-expression.

This shows that digital culture represents a challenging space where young people negotiate between aspiration, ambition, identity crises, and cultural conflict. This paper argues for an understanding of social media sites as cultural institutions that shape contemporary youth in ambivalent ways.

**Keywords: Digital culture, youth identity, Instagram, Reels, cultural production, consumption practices.**

## Introduction

Today, social media sites have changed how young people construct, perform, and negotiate their identities. Instagram was released on October 12, 2010, and introduced the Reels feature in August 2020. It has emerged as a significant site for youth cultural production. It has over 2 billion monthly active users. The 62% of users are between 18 and 34 years old (Statista). However, these studies have shown that these digital sites have changed

technological determinism and moral panic. People treat social media either as revolutionary democratizing forces or as sites of narcissistic self-promotion and mental health crises.

This study argues for a cultural-studies approach to Instagram. It takes people's digital practices seriously as a form of cultural production and consumption. The digital content was interpreted. This reflects their position within the power structure.

**Social Media as Cultural Production**

It is important to recognize that social media sites are not limited to the communication tools. New innovations function as these hegemonic structures. These sites must be recognized as cultural institutions in their own right. Henry Jenkins' concept of "participatory culture" highlights how digital platforms allow the users to move from passive consumption to active production. Although this framework often underestimates the ways in which platform structure participates through algorithmic governance, interface design, and platform policies (3). A more critical approach recognizes that users produce content and platforms produce users, shaping their practices, desires, and subjectivities through what Gillespie terms "platform politics" (18). José van Dijck and Thomas Poell's concept of the "platform society" provides crucial context for understanding how social media platforms have become infrastructural to contemporary life, mediating social relationships, cultural production, and economic activity (4). Instagram and Reels are not neutral conduits for self-expression but "techno-commercial" systems designed to extract value from user activity through datafication, commodification, and selection (sorting content through algorithmic curation) (8).

Every image posted, reel created, and "like" given generates data that feeds recommendation algorithms. It targets advertisements and shapes the future content. User creativity on platforms contributes to "digital labor," generating value for corporations. Users

actively engage with platforms, employing tactics to subvert constraints, express themselves, form communities, and organize politically.

Algorithms function as mediators in the cultural economy. In contrast to broadcast media, where cultural gatekeepers (editors and producers) explicitly choose content, platform algorithms seem to be neutral and meritocratic. They promise that engaging content will reach its audience regardless of the creator's social status. However, algorithmic curation embeds and amplifies these existing inequalities. Noble demonstrates how search algorithms reproduce racism; similar dynamics operate in content recommendation (1-10). Instagram's algorithm rewards content that generates high engagement quickly, favoring creators with existing follower bases, professional production values, and cultural capital to decode platform preferences.

## Performing Identity: The Intersectional Self on Instagram

Identity presentation on Instagram and Reels operates through what Erving Goffman terms the presentation of self," the strategic display of particular identity facets to specific audiences (1-15). However, digital identity performance differs from face-to-face interactions in crucial ways. The synchronicity of social media allows for careful curation and editing, which is unavailable in embodied encounters. The "context collapse" identified by Boyd means that multiple audiences-family, friends, romantic interests, employers, and strangers-potentially view the same content, requiring users to negotiate competing expectations and perform identity for diverse audiences simultaneously (49-51). The persistence of digital content means that identity performances remain archived, searchable, and potentially embarrassing as users' self-understandings evolve over time. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality proves indispensable for analyzing digital identity performance in the Indian context (1241-1299). Young people do not simply perform "youth identity"; rather, they

navigate intersecting identities shaped by caste, class, gender, sexuality, region, religion, and language. A Dalit woman creating content performs identity differently than an upper-caste man, and an English-speaking urban youth's digital habitus differs from that of Tamil-speaking rural youth. These intersecting axes of identity are not merely preservative but constitutive. It produces distinctive subject positions and cultural practices in the process.

Caste operates in digital spaces in complex and often obscure ways. In contrast to the United States, where race is visibly marked and explicitly discussed in digital contexts, caste often remains "invisible" on Instagram despite its profound structuring of users' cultural capital, aesthetic sensibilities, and social networks. Surnames that signal caste identity may be strategically included or neglected in the data. On the other hand, language choices-English versus regional languages, standardized versus vernacular forms-carry caste and class connotations. Even aesthetic preferences reveal caste frames: upper-caste users often settle toward understated, globally inflected aesthetics associated with "good taste," However OBC and Dalit users may embrace what dominant groups dismiss as extravagant" (Ramnath 234-237). The platform's global orientation and English dominance advantage upper-caste users who possess cosmopolitan cultural capital, marginalizing regional, caste-specific cultural forms. However, users from marginalized communities openly politicize their presence on Instagram. They use the platform for caste consciousness-raising and community-building. They employ Instagram to share quotes from Dr. Ambedkar, document caste atrocities, and construct counter-publics that challenge Brahminical hegemony. These practices represent what Sarah Sharma and Rianka Singh term "caste pedagogies" educational interventions that make caste visible and contestable in digital spaces (412). However, such open caste politics are less prevalent on Instagram. Most users either reproduce caste privilege or perform post-caste cosmopolitanism that complicates ongoing caste inequalities.

Class performance on Instagram centers on consumption displays and lifestyle aesthetics. Bourdieu argues that consumption serves primarily to signal class position" distinction" communicated through taste (169-172). Instagram intensifies this logic, transforming the platform into what Marwick terms a "status system" where users compete for visibility and validation through strategic self-presentation (368). Conspicuous consumption, such as displaying branded goods, international travel, restaurant meals, and leisure activities, signals economic capital and upward mobility. The rise of "flat lay" photography arranging consumer goods, "outfit of the day" posts, and travel photography testify to consumption's centrality in digital identity construction. However, consumption on Instagram is not simply about possessing goods but performing the "right" relationship to consumption and displaying cultural capital through taste, curation, and aesthetic sensibility. A user from a modest economic background carefully curates a few strategic purchases to project upward mobility, deploys "hustle culture" narratives celebrating entrepreneurship, or aestheticize budget consumption through "affordable luxury" framing. Conversely, elite users often perform "effortless" consumption and understated wealth, distinguishing themselves from "try-hard" aspirational users through subtle class markers such as particular brands, locations, or aesthetic styles that are legible only to insiders.

Regional identity represents another crucial axis of difference on Instagram. While the platform's infrastructure and aesthetics privilege global metropolitan culture, regional users increasingly create content in local languages, celebrating regional cultural forms from Tamil cooking videos to Punjabi dance challenges and Malayalam comedy skits. This vernacularization of Instagram represents what Ashish Rajadhyaksha terms "digital vernaculars" the adaptation of global digital technologies to local cultural contexts (201). Regional content often garners massive engagement, suggesting a demand for culturally proximate content that escapes the English-language, metropolitan hegemony. However,

regional creators face marginalization from brand partnerships, influencer networks, and platform visibility, which favor English-speaking cosmopolitan creators. The hierarchy between "pan-Indian" and "regional" content reproduces linguistic and cultural hierarchies within nation-states.

Gender fundamentally shapes identity performance on Instagram, with platform aesthetics and affordances encouraging particular forms of gendered self-presentation. Rosalind Gill argues that postfeminist culture requires women to perform femininity as freely chosen identity project However obscuring structural constraints and gender inequalities (153). Instagram represents a dynamic in which women engage in intensive aesthetic labor, makeup tutorials, outfit documentation, and body display framed as empowerment and self-expression rather than patriarchal discipline. Meanwhile, men's Instagram presence typically centers on achievement, humor, or expertise rather than bodily display, reflecting persistent gendered expectations regarding appropriate self-presentation on social media.

## Body Politics and Aesthetic Labor in the Visual Economy

Instagram's visual-centric design makes the body central to identity performance, transforming users into what Hearn terms "branded selves, where bodily capital generates economic and social value (197). The platform's filters, editing tools, and strategic framing enable users to present idealized bodily images; however, these same affordances intensify bodily anxieties and self-surveillance. Rosalind Gill argues that media culture requires women to engage in constant bodily labor diet, exercise, grooming, cosmetic procedures presenting this labor as freely chosen self-expression rather than gendered discipline (147-151). The "Instagram face" characterized by high cheekbones, full lips, arched eyebrows, and flawless skin, exemplifies how platforms homogenize bodily aesthetics while racializing beauty standards. Instagram aesthetics in India, influenced by colorism and Eurocentric beauty

standards, favor lighter skin tones. Despite challenges from some creators, algorithms and economic incentives perpetuate colorism.

The body on Instagram Reels complicates these narratives. Users share unfiltered images, celebrate diverse body types, and challenge narrow beauty standards through hashtags such as #bodypositivity and #selflove. These interventions represent genuine resistance to commercial beauty culture and create supportive communities for users marginalized by the normative beauty standards. However, Banet-Weiser demonstrates how body positivity itself becomes commodified and incorporated into brand marketing, transforming political critique into a consumable lifestyle choice (98-101). Brands selling diet products and cosmetic procedures deploy body-positive rhetoric to profit from bodily insecurity. The platform's economic model of advertising revenue is dependent on engaging users emotionally, which means that both body shaming and body positivity generate value, rendering the platform structurally agnostic to the politics of content.

The work of appearing attractive, interesting, and authentic constitutes a central element of the platform. Users spend hours selecting outfits, arranging photoshoots, editing images, and crafting captions, which is unpaid labor that generates content fueling platform growth. Brooke Erin Duffy terms this "aspirational labor," work performed with hope of future monetization but often remaining unwaged (446). Women invest effort in aesthetic labor, both because femininity demands heightened bodily performance and because influencer careers appear to be accessible paths to economic independence. However, the vast majority of users generate nominal economic returns from this labor, subsidizing platforms and influencers while experiencing the psychological costs of constant self-surveillance and social comparison.

The rise of Reels has increased the demand for aesthetic labor by introducing new performative requirements. In contrast to static Instagram posts, where users can carefully compose and edit images, Reels require users to perform for the camera, master video editing,

and follow rapidly changing trends. Dance challenges, lip-sync videos, and comedy skits require an embodied performance and timing. However, these formats potentially democratize visibility, enabling users without professional photography skills to garner attention and create new hierarchies based on performance abilities, video editing competencies, and willingness to engage in bodily display. Young women face particular pressure to produce Reels featuring their bodies, dancing, or performing femininity, despite the fact that such content attracts harassment and moral policing.

Fitness culture on Instagram represents a salient site for analyzing body politics. Gym selfies, workout videos, transformation posts, and dietary documentation proliferate across the platform, celebrating disciplined bodies as achievements and moral virtue. This content draws on neoliberal discourses valorizing self-optimization, personal responsibility, entrepreneurial selfhood, and the body as a project requiring constant investment and improvement (5-7). However, fitness culture is deeply classed and gendered. Access to gyms, personal trainers, nutritional supplements, and leisure time for exercise requires economic resources that are not equally distributed. Women's fitness content often emphasizes aesthetics, achieving "toned" bodies, and weight loss, whereas men's fitness content focuses on strength and performance. The celebration of disciplined bodies implicitly pathologizes "undisciplined" bodies marked by poverty, disability, or different aesthetic priorities.

## Consumer Culture and Identities

Instagram Reels function as powerful consumer capitalism engines. It transforms users into consumers and advertisements are used. The platform integrates commercial content with user-generated content, making consumption central to identity and social interaction. Shopping features enable direct purchasing from posts, influencer marketing blurs the boundaries between authentic recommendations and paid promotions, and algorithmic feeds

intersperse friends' content with brand advertisements. This creates what Turow terms "the daily you" hyper-personalized commercial environments where advertising targets individual users based on detailed behavioral data (93-96). Aspirational posts presenting idealized lifestyles oriented toward upward mobility dominate Instagram's aesthetics. Users record luxury consumption, international travel, fine dining, and leisure activities, performing the life they aspire to rather than the life they live. This aspiration is classed and globalized: metropolitan and cosmopolitan consumption patterns associated with "modern" subjectivity versus "traditional" or "backward" regional practices are contrasted. Nandini Sundar argues that in contemporary India, consumption has become central to middle-class identity formation, with global brand consumption signaling modernity and social advancement (3025). Instagram intensifies these dynamics. However, aspirational consumption on Instagram reveals class anxieties as well as class confidence. Users from modest economic backgrounds often engage in what Pierre Bourdieu terms "the cultural goodwill of the dominated classes" emulating elite consumption patterns but lacking the economic capital to sustain such practices (396). This may involve purchasing counterfeit luxury goods, photographing borrowed items, or carefully framing shots to suggest affluence while obscuring material constraints. The precarity underlying much of the aspirational content, the hustling, budgeting, and performance required to project upward mobility, remains hidden beneath the polished surfaces.

The platform's economy rewards consumption displays through engagement metrics. Posts featuring luxury goods, exotic locations, or aspirational lifestyles typically garner more likes and comments than mundane content, creating feedback loops that incentivize consumerism. Brands leverage this dynamic through influencer partnerships and pay creators to promote their products and services. The influencer economy has grown exponentially, with the global market reaching $16.4 billion in 2022 (Influencer Marketing Hub). In India, influencer creators with 1,000-100,000 followers increasingly monetize their audiences by

receiving free products, brand payments, or affiliate commissions for promotion. However, not all Instagram consumption is purely aspirational or individualistic. Some users strategically deploy consumption for community building and political expression. Dalit entrepreneurs use Instagram to market products and challenge caste-based occupational hierarchies. Environmental activists promote sustainable consumption and critique fast fashion through "conscious consumer" content. Regional creators celebrate the vernacular consumption of local foods, traditional clothing, and regional cultural practices, asserting cultural pride against homogenizing globalization.

These practices suggest that consumption on Instagram can serve purposes beyond individual status competition, although such minoritarian uses struggle against the platform's dominant consumer-capitalist logic. The aestheticization of everyday life on Instagram transforms mundane consumption into cultural performance. Coffee becomes "coffee culture," breakfast becomes "brunch aesthetic," reading becomes "bookstagram." This aestheticisation reflects what Boltanski and Chiapello term "the new spirit of capitalism": capitalism's incorporation of artistic critique and bohemian values into commercial logic (97-102). Instagram allows users to perform creative, authentic, and aesthetically sophisticated selves through consumption; yet, this apparent resistance to commercial culture actually intensifies its expanding markets, generating content for platforms, and enrolling creativity in capital accumulation.

**Conclusion**

This study examined Instagram, mainly its Reels, as complex cultural spaces where youth perform identity, negotiate consumption, and engage in forms of both resistance and conformity. Rather than treating these platforms as utopian democratizers, we analyzed them

as ambivalent sites shaped by the contradictory forces of enablement and constraint, possibility and foreclosure, and resistance and reproduction.

Instagram intensifies consumer capitalism by centralizing consumption in identity and social relationship-building. However, it generates economic value for the corporations. The influencer economy promises democratized fame but delivers precarity and reproduces inequality. Instagram reflects and intensifies the broader beauty standards. The platform's visual economy makes bodily capital central to social value, especially for female users. Colorism, fatphobia, and Eurocentric standards shape the validation of the body. However, body positivity movements challenge this notion. Resistance exists but is limited to a few cases. Political organizing, consciousness-raising, and community formation on Instagram have meaningful uses beyond commercial intent, but they generate data and engagement that feed algorithms designed to maximize profit. Resistance is incorporated, dissent is commodified, and critique is weaponized. Rejecting platforms means losing vital spaces for connection and organizing; however, participation means enrolling in systems of exploitation and surveillance. These contradictions cannot be resolved through individual actions or reforming the platforms. They reflect deeper tensions in contemporary capitalism between democratization and exploitation, agency and constraint, and resistance and incorporation. Platform corporations' profit from both conformity and resistance, and both consumption and critique. Users navigate these contradictions daily, making tactical choices within strategic systems designed to extract value from all activities.

Thus, Instagram is important for understanding contemporary youth identity, consumption practices and political possibilities. These platforms are neither oppressive nor emancipatory. However, contradictory sites where exploitation and agency, conformity and resistance, and reproduction and transformation coexist in an uneasy manner exist. Scholars, activists, and users alike face the challenge of acknowledging these contradictions. However,

we must work collectively toward digital cultures that prioritize the human over corporate profit, democratic participation over algorithmic control, and social justice over reproducing social inequality.

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