Filtered Self: Navegando no *Instagram* por Contas Públicas e Privadas

Filtered Self: Navigating Instagram through Public and Private Accounts

SWASTI ACHARYA
Fractal.ai

Resumo: Este ensaio se propõe a explorar a natureza das relações na plataforma de rede social Instagram. A partir de um trabalho de campo com 50 usuários do aplicativo, observamos que os hábitos e modelos da comunicação mediada por computador são profundamente conectados às preferências, círculos sociais *offline* e situação social de cada usuário. Baseado na obra 'A Distinção: Crítica Social do Julgamento' (1984), de Pierre Bourdieu, argumentamos que a criação de um Finsta (uma conta secundária no Instagram) age como uma fronteira simbólica entre ideias autoproduzidas sobre o que é público e privado. Ou seja, a criação de contas *Finsta* marca uma mudança no desenvolvimento das relações sociais nessa plataforma, segregando os *insiders* dos *outers* (Merton, 1972). Usando uma abordagem etnográfica visual, o ensaio busca responder às seguintes perguntas: Por que os usuários criam duas contas no Instagram (o *Insta* e o *Finsta*)? Como os dois espaços virtuais diferem um do outro em termos de conteúdos, tom e público? O que isso nos diz sobre a natureza da auto-apresentação e suas implicações para o círculo social do usuário? E como as categorias conceituais de 'classe' e 'status' se encaixam no mundo virtual do Instagram?

Palavras-chave: Comunicação mediada por computador; interação social online; Instagram; apresentação pessoal; fronteiras simbólicas; mídia social; classe; Geração Z

Abstract: This essay explores self-presentation and social relationships among Indian GenZ on Instagram. Based on a digital ethnography conducted among 50 users, it observes that patterns of computer-mediated communication are deeply tied to individual tastes, offline social circles, and class positions. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste (1984), I argue that creating a finsta (a secondary Instagram account) establishes a symbolic boundary between self-defined notions of 'public' and 'private.' The finsta segregates 'insiders' from 'outers' (Merton 1972), marking a shift in how relationships are navigated in virtual spaces. Using a visual ethnographic approach, this essay aims to address the following questions: Why do users create two Instagram accounts – a main insta and a finsta? How do the two virtual spaces differ in content, tone, and audience? What do these differences reveal about self-presentation and its impact on social circles? Finally, how do class and social status manifest in Instagram's virtual world?

Keywords: Computer-mediated communication; online social interaction; Instagram; self-presentation; symbolic boundaries; social media; class; GenZ

82

I. INTRODUCTION

This essay unpacks the experience of navigating two types of Instagram accounts that a single user may create.[1] Namely, a *finsta* is assumed to be an antithesis of the *insta*. The former, more private, combines 'fake' and 'insta' leading to the creation of a *finstagram* (often eulogised as 'fun'). The latter is short for 'Instagram' which is implicitly one's 'real' or public profile. On an app premised on audio-visual content, I argue, this dichotomisation offers a false paradox in the assumption that the *finsta* is where users can be more candid, more true-to-self, with fewer edits and filters. While the 'real' insta is more done-up, and more aesthetically pleasing – suggesting a proportionately higher amount of effort that went into curating it, I propose that *both* formats are conscious, careful presentations of the self that serve to create and maintain social boundaries.

Many people, including 24% of this study's respondents use third-party apps: to edit their content, pre-plan their grid, and schedule their posts for optimum viewership and engagement. These ancillary apps help users get a feel of the overall aesthetic (eg. tone, visual imagery, personal brand positioning) or 'vibe' before revealing it to their audience. Reliance on such apps points towards an obvious investment in the user's online labour, but it does not mean that the non-reliance equals to the lack of curation of Feeds. That is, irrespective of an overt effort to curate, "people are concerned with the way others perceive them, motivating actors to manage their behaviour to present favourable and appropriate images to others" through more subtle cues and impressions (Walther, 2001; Bourdieu, 1996) even in their so-called 'fake' insta.

83

---

[1] Instagram offers three types of Profiles: Personal (for personal use with no intention of monetizing content), Creator (for notable figures and content creators or 'influencers' who can monetize content to earn revenue), and Business (for companies and brands who use the platform for marketing and online presence). Personal profiles can either be set to Public (anyone can follow/view content on the Feed) or Private (users need to first Request to Follow the account in order to view the content). Although it would be interesting to look at the nature of knowledge production that takes place in the different types of virtual spaces formed by such segregations, that discussion is outside the ambit of this essay. The scope of the essay is restricted to the Personal where the *insta* and the *finsta* are more obviously present.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social class remains a complex topic of debate for social and behavioural scientists. The digitalisation of everyday life, particularly since COVID-19, has further led to growing research on contemporary manifestations of class and status in the online world. This essay deploys Pierre Bourdieu's view of class in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* where he argues that cultural tastes are not innate indicators of what is 'good' or 'bad.' Instead, they are socially constructed phenomena shaped by individuals' knowledge of and familiarity with cultural standards, which maintain and reinforce boundaries between themselves and 'lesser' groups.

Bourdieu's framework relies on three types of capital that can be transferred or exchanged within and between groups. *Economic capital* is tied to wealth, *educational capital* stems from institutional credentials and experiences that shape specific cultural tastes, and *social capital* arises from social background and the transmission of tastes through familial socialisation. *Cultural capital*, then, is derived from these existing tastes and dispositions. This framework explains why group or class identity depends more on shared cultural tastes than income levels. Contrary to classical Marxist thought, culture is not "simply an attribute of the superstructure, wholly secondary to the economy […] but is instead a realm of real importance in and of itself" (Veenstra, 2005, p. 250).

As a result, Bourdieu suggests that cultural tastes can index classes as much as classes can index tastes. He writes,

> The economic and social conditions which they presuppose, the different ways of relating to realities and fictions, of believing in fictions and the realities they simulate, with more or less distance and detachment, are very closely linked to the different possible positions in social space and, consequently, bound up with the systems of disposition (habitus) characteristic of the different classes and class fractions (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 7).

Consumptions based on taste and preferences must then work in a manner to legitimise and rank certain traits as more appealing than others. This becomes particularly evident on visually-driven apps like Instagram or Tinder where physical appearance and portrayal of the self become central to personal narratives and self-promotion (Strübel, 2023). Even where content may be rawer or more candid, users

84

engage in self-monitoring to maintain a particular impression (eg. sense of humour through captions).

In the global, multicultural context of social media, it might not be possible to find universal patterns and trends reflective of a tech-savvy youth's consumption of mass media and popular culture through smartphone screens (Walther, 2008; North, 2008). However, it could still be possible that the basic principles that motivate users across cultures and geographies are interconnected and often inspired by the same influencers (Sitompul *et al*, 2023). This is because online social interactions have propagated a sense of common and shared cultural knowledge according to which users behave and act (Wan, 2013). Everyday participation in social media acquaints the user with managing impression formation and manipulating interpersonal actions in a way that presents themselves in a positive manner (Goffman, 1956). According to the *Brunswik Lens Model*, the behaviour of individuals and the artefacts produced by them are intended to reflect their personality through subtle cues enabling the observer to make inferences about the individual (Utz, 2010).

Next, the *similarity-attraction hypothesis* suggests that people are attracted to like-minded individuals and many social networks are structured in a manner that stems from existing social relationships (Utz, 2010). The functional role of friendships in such contexts is amplified through the explicit statements they make as well as physical attractiveness and perceived visual appeal (Walther, 2007). For example, if a person's friend circle consists of other members who are considered popular, this automatically gives them a type of social currency and reinforces their status (Valenzuela *et al,* 2009; Ellison *et al,* 2007). In the case of Facebook, "people made judgments about a target based on comments left by the target's friends and by the attractiveness of those friends" (Walther, 2008, p. 45). This occurred even when they did not explicitly share the information because viewers assumed it to be sanctioned under the person's known relationship with the friend in question.

Similarly, *finstas* reveal the dichotomy of 'inner circle' and 'outer circles' which acquires legitimisation because it is a self-constructed realm of the 'public' and the

85

'private'. This is the most critical element of delineating symbolic boundaries among social circles because we see how people come to be known by the company they keep (Yates, 2018; Walther, 2008). These symbolic boundaries are revealed in behavioural patterns of association that capture the character and pattern of interactions that hierarchize relationships and group members based on their shared habits and traits. These are described as:

> Conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorise objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality. Examining them allows us to capture the dynamic dimensions of social relations, as groups compete in the production, diffusion, and institutionalization of alternative systems and principles of classifications. Symbolic boundaries also separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership (Epstein 1992, p. 232 *apud* Lamont; Molnar, 2002, p. 168).

Such virtual boundaries are not fictional and have tangible implications on social network dynamics within groups (eg. posting photos of a party and hiding it from someone who was not invited). While the most evident manifestation could be through skin colour or gender identity, subtle but important associations are also made through parlance: whether the person can articulate themselves in a manner that is considered 'cool' in present-day social media etiquette. If not, then the categorisation of 'us' versus 'them' or 'inner circle' as opposed to 'outer circle' takes shape through 'acquaintances' and 'close friends', the 'public' and the 'private'.

This was reaffirmed through my interviews with respondents where the factors of 'trust' and 'comfort' play an important role in configuring such groups. Even though it may seem common-sense knowledge to suppose that humans are the most comfortable with those whom they can trust blindly, it is a rarity to witness the capacity to 'trust' someone outside their own social milieu online. Through an exploration of the *finsta* phenomenon amongst Indian GenZ, this essay attempts to strengthen the argument that symbolic boundaries that maintain the distinction between the in-group and the out-group become visibly obvious on Instagram.

As content creation is monetised and newer generations aspire to be professional Influencers, I suspect this dichotomy of public-private merge with work-leisure encourages people to actively bifurcate their virtual persona. Exploring these

86

Filtered Self: navegando no Instagram por contas públicas e privadas| Acharya
Passagens: Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação da Universidade Federal do Ceará, v. 15, n.2. Especial, 2024

dynamics in the context of digital labour, content creation, and online media consumption could yield significant insights into the new creator economy, even though such an analysis lies outside the scope of this essay.

III. RESEARCH METHOD AND FINDINGS

To understand *why* users create multiple Instagram accounts, we first need to understand *who* hangs out on Instagram. LinkedIn is a social network and job site used predominantly by working professionals, entrepreneurs, and C-suite executives. Orkut and Myspace paved the way for Facebook to become Millennials' preferred platform in the 2010s. Today, GenZ make up the largest cohort of users on Instagram[2] as well as the participants of this study.

Primary research for this essay was conducted in three phases through snowball sampling during the Covid19 lockdown: online Instagram Story poll (n=83), survey (n=50), and in-depth interview (n=16).

As an Instagram user, I used participant observation and the app's in-built tools to access and study participants' finsta feeds for the research. I first used my Instagram Story[3] to carry out a pilot Poll in February 2020 (see fig. 1 and 2). It was seen by 355 users where the total number of voters was 83. Of these, 77 voted 'yes' and 6 voted 'no'. After gauging responses and interest from this, I did another poll in May 2020 (see fig. 3) to invite participants to fill out a survey. It was seen by 360 users and n=66, where 'yes'=65 (participants willing to participate in the study) and 'no' = 1.

Each of the 65 participants was sent a semi-structured survey questionnaire with open-ended questions via Google Forms which rendered 50 complete responses. Next, participants were further screened and invited for 1-1 in-depth interviews to share their experiences on the platform and a virtual walkthrough of how they navigate the app.

The screener criteria included: use of a *finstagram*, age between 18-26 years old, residential neighbourhood in urban cities, and date of joining the app. Of these interviews, 9 had a Finstagram account of their own and the 7 who did not, followed their friend's *finstas.*

---

[2] 18-24 year olds make up for almost 32% of all users on Instagram (Source: Statista).

[3] An image which disappears after 24 hours. People can React or Reply to it but this would reach the original user directly and will not be visible to others who can view it.

Figure 1a - Pilot poll on my personal Instagram story.
Figure 1b - Preliminary poll used for study.
Figure 1c - Secondary poll used for finsta users.
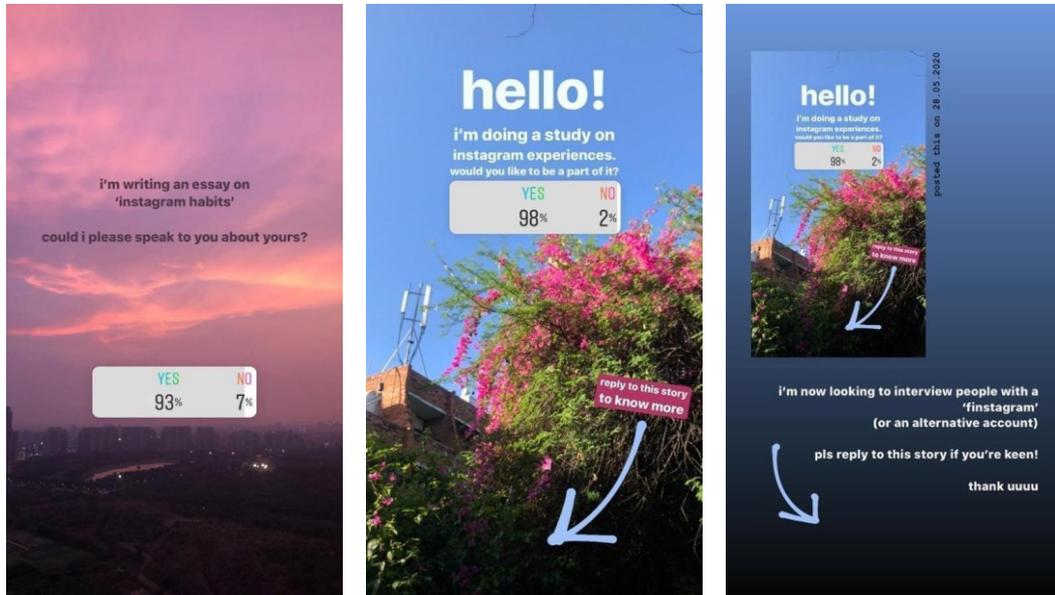
Source: Instagram prinstscreen.

Most survey respondents were in their pre or early twenties (GenZ, born in 1997 or after) and three were in their mid/late-twenties (Millennials)[4]. While more than 70% belonged to English-speaking, upper-middle-class households in Delhi and Gurgaon, the remaining came from similar urban backgrounds from Mumbai, Bangalore, Calcutta, and Ahmedabad. Less than 10% were Indians residing abroad in Canada, the Netherlands, and the USA, and the majority of the respondents were female (62%).

Most users remember creating their first accounts between 2013 and 2015, during their high school years, and 68% continue to use the username they started with. The daily average time spent on the application was 1 hour 26 minutes primarily used for (doom) scrolling through the Home Feed to view content shared by people they

---

[4] The labels "Gen Z" and "Millennial" are used here for simplicity and convenience, recognizing that there is often significant overlap in experiences, values, and preferences shared by individuals from both generations.

follow, swiping through Stories, and sending memes, funny posts, or interesting content to their friends. Posting on the Feed occurred at least once a month or less, while posting on Stories was more frequent, averaging at least once a week or more (users were more willing to 'spam' on Stories as compared to their public Feed). Many users mentioned using Instagram as a source of current affairs and news, especially because it includes first-hand information shared by people on the ground and sometimes even known to them in real life, legitimising the information they were seeing. Almost all participants followed people they know personally; meme, satire, or humour accounts; art-related accounts (fine arts, design, architecture, etc); and some form of news such as *The New Yorker, Atlantic, Al Jazeera, Scroll.in,* and *The Wire.* A few participants also mentioned using Instagram to search specific topics through hashtags, particularly for food recipes.

When gaining new followers, respondents consider three main factors: whether they know the person in real life (84%); whether they trust and/or like them enough based on their account (54%); and whether they share mutual accounts (48%). Conversely, when deciding to follow someone, users prioritised content on the feed (if visible i.e. Public account) (98%); knowing them in real life (92%); supporting or sharing work that needed visibility (74%); and finally, wanting to get to know the person better ("sliding into DMs") (54%). Only 24% cited mutual connections as a motivation to follow someone. When asked whether the ratio of Followers to Following matters to the respondents, almost all respondents said it did not matter to them even if it did initially. However, in the case of the *finsta* these numbers reflect the deliberate segregation of audiences, carefully determining who can access certain types of content and mirroring offline social dynamics of trust and connection.

Instagram's Close Friends feature allows users to filter who can view their Stories, applicable to both public and private Instagram accounts. Over 70% of respondents reported using this list to filter for reasons such as: not wanting to share everything with the 'whole world'; limiting private content to trusted individuals; and sharing lighthearted or 'nonsense' (spam) content without overwhelming everyone who follows them; and finally, to hide things from family or co-workers. The 28% who did not use this feature, mentioned they already had a *finsta* to serve this purpose or found it difficult to decide who to include or exclude. Simultaneously, the private and manually

89

controlled environment of *finstas* reaffirms the notion that technical platform-specific features – restricted audience controls and lack of public viewership – directly shape new forms of social interaction and sustenance of social networks (Valenzuela *et al,* 2009).

Through such audience segregation, *finstas* further demonstrate online labour required to differentiate between public and private life. This underscores the practice of creating virtual safe spaces for selective self-expression. At the same time, these spaces offer an avenue to form new connections to expand user networks and form meaningful relationships (Ellison *et al,* 2007). These 'insiders' or 'core' members who witness unfiltered and unabashed presentations are also the same people who might be privy to opportunities available in smaller networks (Valenzuela *et al*, 2009) such as a 'call for models' for a photoshoot or a list of restaurant recommendations for a holiday in Rome.

On their primary account, people refrain from sharing nudity (80%); alcohol, cigarettes, and other substance use (78%); personal details or details about family (68%); and strong language, violence, etc. (64%). Deleting or archiving posts revolve around dissatisfaction with the visual appeal (48%); due to factual incorrectness (30%); and no longer being in contact with the person(s) in the photograph (26%). Respondents have described their main account as "an aesthetic visual diary", "an insight into my being", "a way to keep good photos", "happy things!", "reflection of myself", "visual note-keeping," "a digital scrapbook," "participation in activities", "places I've visited", etc. By contrast, users were less likely to delete or archive content on their *finsta*. This boundary maintains 'publicly' acceptable information or imagery by ensuring the 'private' realm features their uncensored opinions and identities.

Although only 24% of the respondents used auxiliary apps to organise, edit, and plan their Feed, more than 50% affirmed that they believe their account has a certain "style", "vibe" or "aesthetic". This is practised differently for different users – for example, some use only certain colour schemes or filters to keep visual consistency; some avoid posting too many pictures of their faces; some deliberately time the post of 'random' things to move away from a hyper-curated feed; and so on. A common theme

90

emerged: irrespective of visual choices, users emphasised an affective emotion or attachment aroused by what is posted on the feed. For example, Sasha[5] said, "I realised recently that lots of my posts on IG have lots of water in them i.e. they were taken by the sea/ocean. I think that's because of a personal attachment to those spaces, and just the fact that I lived along the coast for a few years." But many strong answers move in the opposite direction with respondents claiming that it is 'pretentious' or 'unnecessary'.

Not all users have identical experiences, and even when the user is not trying to please people, the active effort of audience management in creating virtual safe spaces ultimately dictates the content they share. This is the core of my assertion: contrary to popular belief, manoeuvring instas / *finstas* requires precise, calculated articulation of oral and visual language that echoes and identifies oneself with an audience of close friends with a purposeful intent of virtual world-making.

Despite the effort to move away from a hyper-curated feed on *finstas*, people on social media apps where visual self-presentation is critical, like Tinder, became more conscious of scrutiny and judgement of what appears in their background, what brands are visible, what food choices say about their lifestyle, and so on (Strübel, 2023; Li *et al,* 2022). Acknowledging this, 96% believe certain unsaid rules of social interaction (Misyak *et al,* 2014) on Instagram went beyond the obvious: no trolling, no harassment, be nice and kind. Some verbatim quotes[6] are illustrated below:

1. On Self Presentation

R3: Presenting a version of yourself, usually one that's happy, successful, enterprising, conventionally pretty, forcibly witty, and woke. It's anxiety-inducing, and performance can be frustrating. There's also this added pressure

---

[5] Names changed to maintain privacy.

[6] Respondents have been coded as R<NUMBER> to maintain privacy. The number indicates the order in which they filled the initial Google Form.

to be righteous, liberal, and have an opinion on everything for the sake of sounding smart or clued in, which is often misplaced.

R11: Posting at a time when you're likely to receive most traction, basing future content based on performance, dividing content between the personal and public with the public usually containing less vulnerable and private information, posting 'good' information about yourself, liking and engaging with friends' content whether you actually like it or not.

R35: You shouldn't upload more than one post in one day. Your profile should have an "aesthetic" that you follow—and all "unattractive"/funny content should only be posted on your finsta. You should have a higher Follower count than a Following count.

R38: Most people post content/stories and comment on others' content in ways that reflect some level of positivity about themselves, their lives, their friends' lives, or general accounts they follow. Wanting to portray your own life in an appealing way that soothes the ego undergirds this etiquette and general behaviour on IG. This is not the case for everyone, but for most from what I see. Because of COVID and the current rebellion against the police state in the US, people *recently* are starting to use their IG platforms less as an ego project and more as a tool to educate, spread awareness and essential information, and uplift others' voices at such a critical time.

2. On Intimacy

R2: Only follow a *finsta* account if you know them really well.

R14: You can create an echo chamber of performative posters on your feed, or exclusively creatives, or both, or use it only for people you know. Users make the rules, so it depends on who you surround your feed with.

R47: If someone you know requests to follow you, you should follow them back? Idk if this is a rule but its obv that close friends isn't really about irl[7] close friends just people you're chill with seeing stupid shit you do??? But a lot of people also define it otherwise so that's inserting.

R23: There seems to be a difference between tagging someone on a post and DMing[8] them the same thing. The former is more of a declaration where you want people to know and the latter is more intimate.

The quotes above reaffirm two things: first, there is an accepted and often followed rule that dictates how good-looking one's Feed is supposed to be; second, the *finsta* becomes a space to deviate from this norm because it is assumed to be judgement-free; a space to move away from the existing dominant Instagram culture (De Certeau, 1984). It becomes seen as a 'private' sphere distinguished from the 'public' that the users construct for themselves which also helps them zone out from the 'noisy' or 'cluttered' content they see on their insta. Some descriptions of *finstas* mentioned in the questionnaires include:

R6: My *finsta* is for funny weird stuff happening in my life.

R12: Something that you don't want changing the vibe of the primary profile.

R23: An account for a select few very close friends and where you post everything raw.

93

---

[7] Short for 'in real life'.

[8] Short for 'Direct Message/ing'.

R29: Because one account wasn't enough for people's self-obsession, they had to make another one that's funny enough for everyone's approval where they can say politically incorrect things that their "aesthetic" account cannot.

R35: *Finsta* is like a parody account but also a space where I was completely and unabashedly me.

In effect, the *finsta* acts as a more personal and intimate account a user creates "for trash pics and the outtakes reel of [one's] main, hyper-curated Instagram account" (Owen 94). If the main insta showcases an organised Feed of planned images with distinct colour palettes, styles, emotions, and objects associated with the aestheticized self, then the *finsta* is its antithesis. Its tone is different, its audience is smaller, and users are less concerned with how pretty it looks. In many ways, it is a space curated as a brain dump, a place to laugh at yourself or make jokes about your closest friends knowing they won't be offended. All of this while being more carefree and less worried about value judgements because this is accessible only to a few, close, trustworthy groups of people. While it cannot be generalised that all users who have an insta and a *finsta* experience the same affective realities on the app, it is still worth looking at the patterns that emerge from this segregation (in terms of content, tone, audience, and so on) that is made consciously and purposefully. The following images are examples (from in-depth interviews) of user bios and Feeds[9]. On the left is the public account and on the right, the *finsta* or 'spam' account.

USER 1.

---

[9] They are coded as U<NUMBER> to distinguish from respondents in the questionnaire, even though they have also filled it.

94

On the 'main' account (Figure 2a), this user has 5000+ followers and follows 1000+ accounts. The fraction is inverted on the 'fake' account (Figure 2b) as the Following count is higher than the Followers count. The bio in the finsta is a pun on 'Safarnama', an 11th-century Persian text on travel writing to describe how this is a space for the user's 'suffering'.

Figure. 2a and 2b - Main account and 'fake' account numbers for User 1
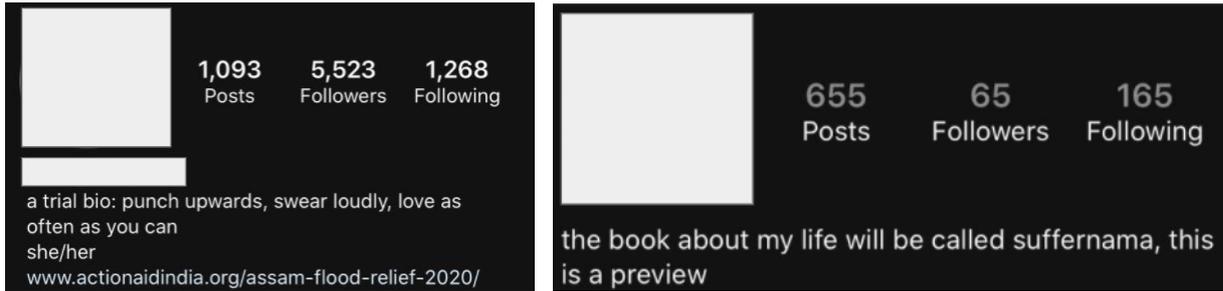
Source: Instagram prinstscreen.

The following images show the visual contrast between instagram and finsta accounts. The left (Figure 2c) shows the user's more evidently 'curated' feed while the right (Figure 2d) shows outtakes from the person's life featuring extreme close-up shots, excerpts from chats, funny poses, and even a replica of the hammer and sickle.

95

**Figure. 2c and 2d** - Instagram account and 'finsta' visual contrast
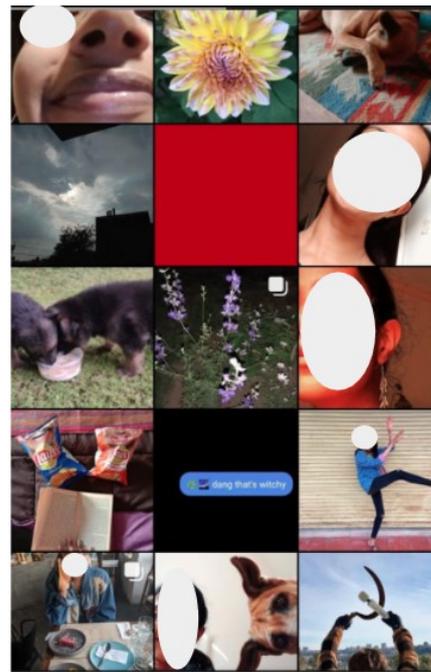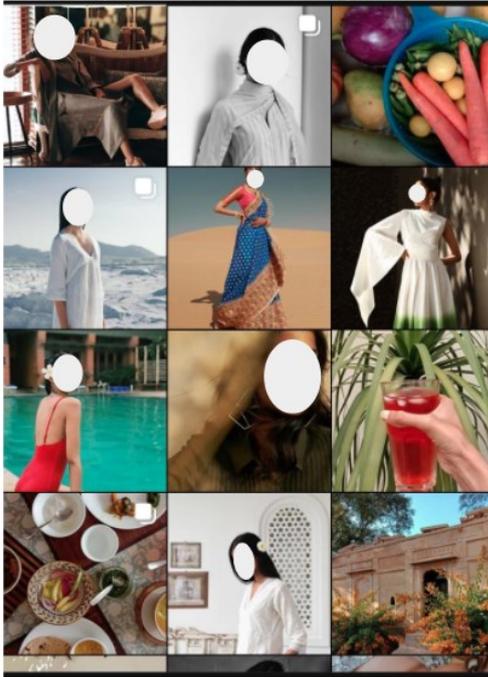
Source: Instagram prinstscreen.

USER 2.

The ratio of Followers to Following is different on both accounts where it is almost equal on the finsta, as shown on Figures 3a and 3b. The user refers to the 'main' insta as a 'socially appropriate account' by linking the handle. This implies that the user considers the finsta to not be socially appropriate.
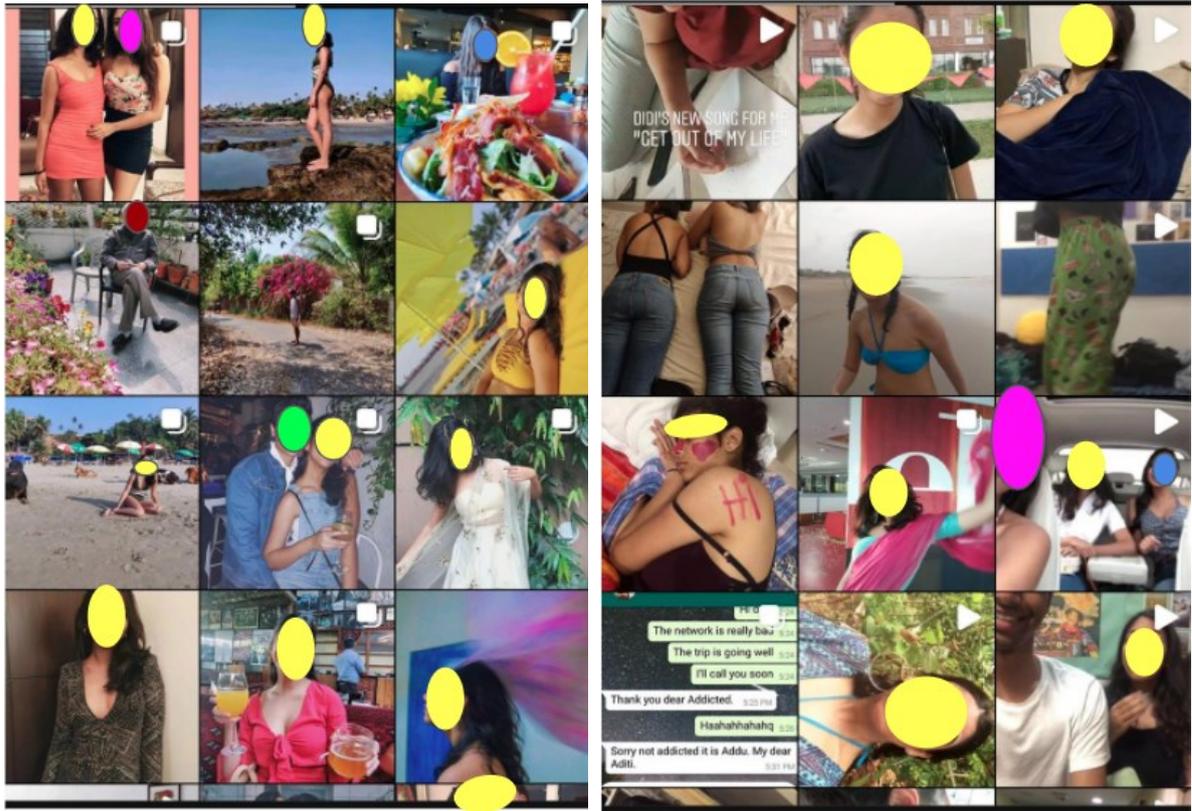
Figure. 3a and 3b - Ratio of Followers to Following for User 2
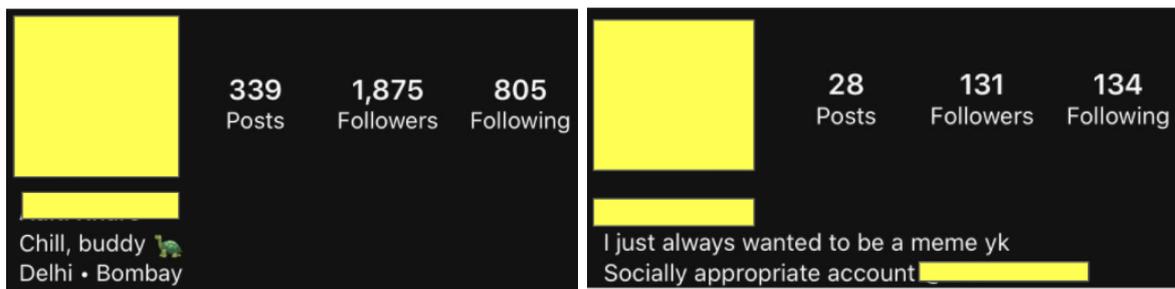
Source: Instagram prinstscreen.

The content on the left (Figure 3c) is more colourful and visually appealing while on the right (Figure 3d) it does not appear to have many 'filters'. They are close-up shots and 'socially inappropriate' outtakes from the 'main' account.

**Figure. 3c and 3d -** Contrast of filters and framing types for User 2

Source: Instagram prinstscreen.

USER 3.

The ratio of Followers to Following is almost equal on the insta (Figure 4a) and skewed to a higher Following on the finsta (Figure 4b). When the world of social media was nascent, pet videos were iconic. The focus on 'cat content' on the finsta might be an indication towards reclaiming that space where all people did was watch animal content and laugh.

Figure. 4a and 4b - The ratio of Followers to Following for User 3
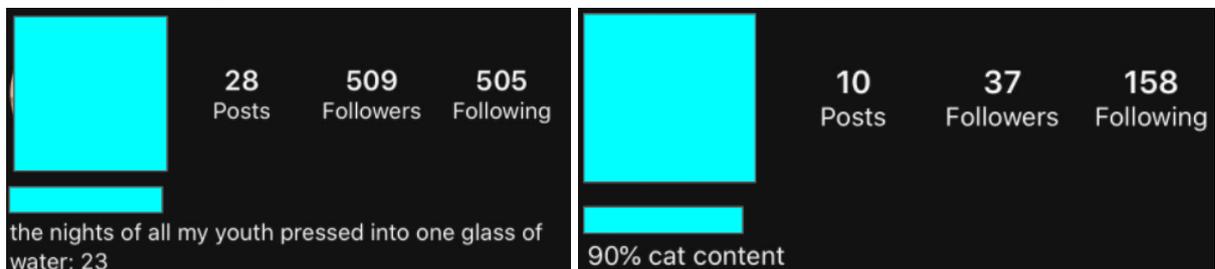
Source: Instagram prinstscreen.

The difference in colour palette, use of filters, and aesthetic style is starkly visible in the two Feeds. The left (Figure 4c) includes blues, yellows, greens; while the right (Figure 4d) is an assemblage of screenshots, cat pics, and memes.

Figure. 4c and 4d - Visual contrast for User 3
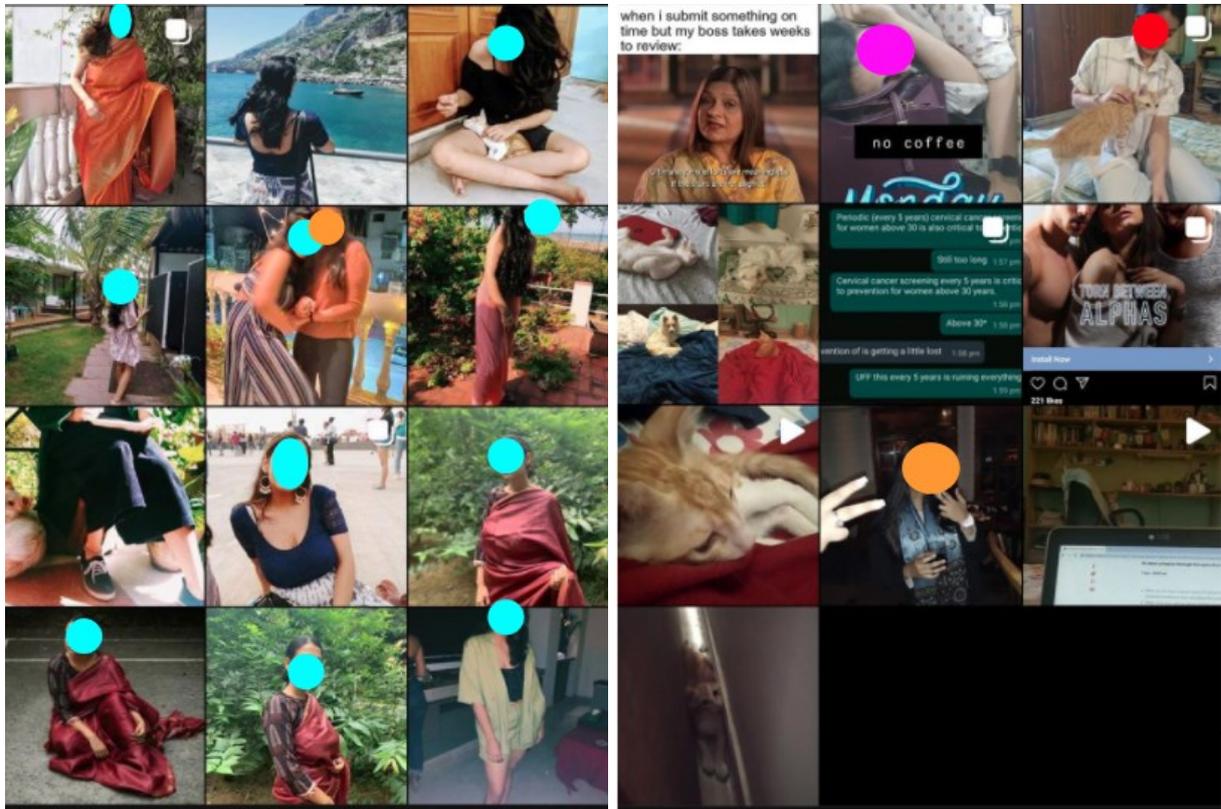
Source: Instagram prinstscreen.

USER 4.

The user follows more people on the insta (Figure 5a) than on their finsta (Figure 5b) but the gap is almost similar. Interestingly, the user deliberately decides to use the prefix 'not' in the handle for their finsta to indicate that this is the opposite or antithesis of their 'main' account.

Figure. 5a and 5b - The ratio of Followers to Following for User 4

Source: Instagram prinstscreen

In the following images, you can see aesthetic differences between insta and finsta. The left (Figure 5c) includes images of pets, food, scenes that follow earthy tones and similar colours. The right (Figure 5d) includes memes and excerpts from chats on WhatsApp.

Figure. 5c and 5d - Visual contrast for User 4
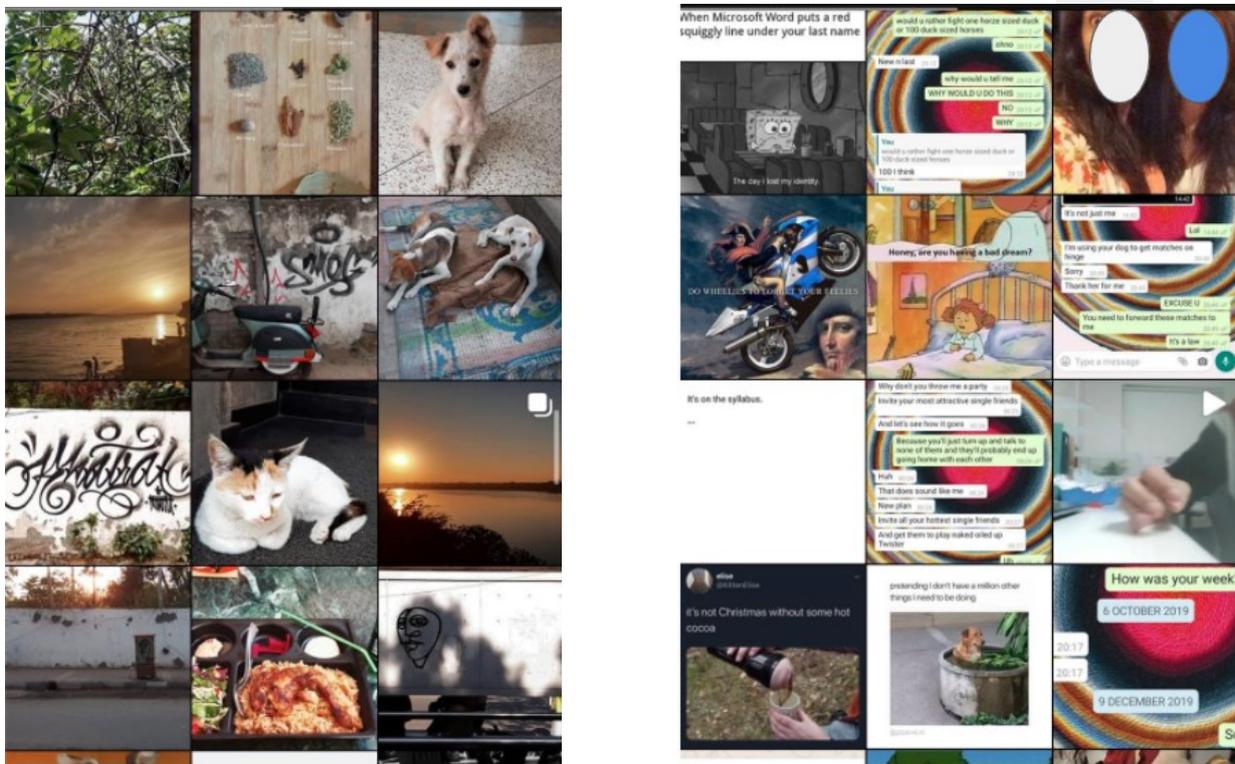
Source: Instagram prinstscreen

The screenshots provide us a glimpse into the 'public' and 'private' realms on Instagram that users create for themselves. Increasingly, the *finsta* comes across as a simultaneous channel or parallel world to socialise and keep certain connections in place

while leaving some out. The mindful separation of the audience (through a Close Friends list or the *finsta*) suggests that people tend to place certain relationships as more valuable than other connections. In this process, some of them are ranked higher than others based on 'closeness', 'intimacy', and 'trust'. It is only natural for human beings to behave and socialise in this manner. This truism, however, appears to have strong positive correlations with the larger nature of stratification in society.
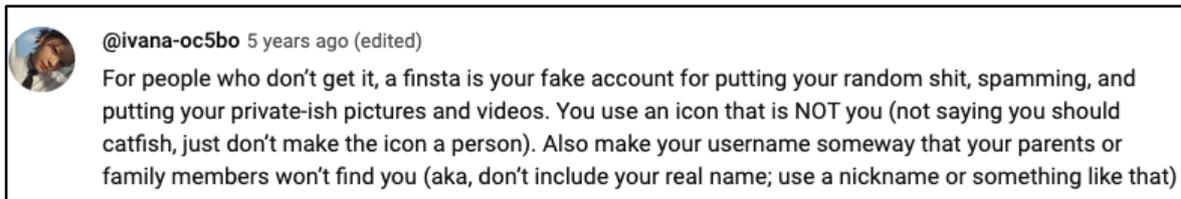
To identify markers of class and cultural affinities for this analysis, interview transcripts and visual data were thematically analysed (Braun; Clarke, 2006) using three criteria. First, education was coded by examining their schooling and college. An International Baccalaureate board or A-levels signified an elite, high-fee school system that a privileged minority had access to in a country like India. Second, the description of homes in urban residences was categorised based on the type of housing (e.g., gated communities, apartment condominiums, and government-provided housing) and access to amenities such as swimming pools or gyms reflecting upwardly mobile India's cosmopolitanism (Brosius, 2010). Third, patterns of cultural consumption and exposure to content on digital media were through participants' references to pop-culture trends, entertainment preferences, and lexical registers formed by internet meme-culture.

100

For example, users who attended elite private schools and lived in gated communities often exhibited shared patterns of trust and self-disclosure on *finsta*, reflecting their socialisation. By contrast, respondents from more diverse educational or residential backgrounds displayed broader but less tightly-knit audiences. Despite this, newer connections — made within the past two years — frequently shared similar educational or residential environments, such as attending comparable schools or living in gated communities (DiMaggio *et al*, 2001; Yates, 2008). These insights highlight how symbolic boundaries mediated by socio-cultural and class dynamics shape virtual spaces for curated self-presentation on online platforms like Instagram (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

Since a *finstagram* account typically has limited reach and is accessible only to those directly connected to the user, it is unlikely that someone random will stumble

upon an account with whom they have zero mutuals[10] (i.e. multiple degrees of separation). However, it cannot be conclusively stated that *finstas* are exclusively a creation of upper-middle class youth, as individuals – regardless of class status – may choose to actively separate their 'public' and 'private' online presence.

Figure 6 - A public comment posted under a YouTube video titled 'What Is a Finsta???

@ivana-oc5bo 5 years ago (edited)
For people who don't get it, a finsta is your fake account for putting your random shit, spamming, and putting your private-ish pictures and videos. You use an icon that is NOT you (not saying you should catfish, just don't make the icon a person). Also make your username someway that your parents or family members won't find you (aka, don't include your real name; use a nickname or something like that)

Source: Youtube prinstscreen

What can be observed is that users tend to feel more connected to individuals who share similar social experiences, leading *finstas* to function as a 'safe space' for 'insiders,' distinct from 'outsiders' (Merton, 1972). This dynamic is influenced by the traits users find desirable or trustworthy in close companions—qualities shaped by their social conditioning and broader social position (Bourdieu). Participants mentioned feeling more connected to those with similar values and interests, describing the *finsta* as 'safe space' for insiders removed from the outsiders. In this way, online social communities continue to reproduce and maintain companionship tied to social position.

For example, one of my respondents said that if the person who has requested to follow them has an orange bandana in their display picture (indexing a Hindu right-wing identity), has too many emojis or a 'weirdly typed' bio, then they were specifically denied access to follow. Such a practice reveals how people index and form impressions of users based on the typed linguistic or visual cues provided on their account and associate them with the type of person they could be which is heavily influenced by their social background (North *et al*, 2018; Walther *et al,* 2008).

Another GenZ said that Instagram is becoming a lot like Facebook where anyone and everyone can come, especially the 'oldies', which clutters their Feeds and creating a *finsta* helps to cordon off access to online spaces.

101

---

[10] *Mutuals* (derived from 'mutual friends') is an internet slang referring to people who follow each other and/or have a third person as common connection who follows them both.

Added to this is the idea that social media, on the surface, appears to be a free, democratising space but that might not always be the case (see fig. 6). A response to such a view is that "It is not classist. It is just cringe!" Even as some of India's TikTok[11] stars gained a lot of fandom, their videos appear to be glorifying stalking, patriarchy and domestic violence. Often, they are shared on Indian meme pages that make fun of the way a person, from a visibly non-urban, low-income household, is 'pretending' to be an actor on TikTok. Here, too, we find that certain habits, behaviours, and ways of being are socially accepted and rejected but they are not universal. Those who reject such a display assert that content is 'cringe-worthy' or just outright 'bad' primarily because it is not in line with their value systems and ideals of what online behaviour should be like.

Figure 7 - A Tweet about TikTok shaming that went viral.

Source: Twitter prinstscreen

According to Melissa Dahl, author of *Cringeworthy: A Theory of Awkwardness*, cringeworthy moments occur when we are yanked out of our perspective, and we can suddenly see ourselves from somebody else's point of view (Dahl, 2018). She writes:

> [Cringe is] the intense visceral reaction produced by an awkward moment, an unpleasant kind of self-recognition where you suddenly see yourself through someone else's eyes. It's a forced moment of self-awareness, and it usually makes you cognizant of the disappointing fact that you aren't measuring up to your own self-concept (Dahl, 2018, p. 14).

On platforms like Instagram, cringe often arises from a perceived violation of an implicit social norm, which serves as an emotional mechanism to enforce socially

---

[11] TikTok was banned in June 2020 in India.

acceptable behaviour by wounding the ego or the perception of the self. However, cringe is not only about awkwardness about the self.

Vicarious or second-hand embarrassment from someone else's actions embodies empathy – feeling embarrassment someone might feel or *ought to* feel if they recognised how others perceived them. However, cringing at someone is different from cringing with someone. We often cringe with someone, feeling the same thing, while recalling funny or embarrassing moments like falling down or getting a bad haircut, instances often shared on *finstas*. But the voyeuristic world of Instagram propels the former by magnifying the visibility of curated personas, making deviations from normative behaviours more pronounced (Strübel, 2023)

Dahl categorises cringe into two types: *compassionate cringe* (or secondhand embarrassment), when you form an emotional identification with the person you're cringing at, fostering empathy despite their lack of self-awareness. And, *contemptuous cringe* which involves an emotional distancing from the person you're cringing at where instead of feeling embarrassment on their behalf, you feel annoyance and disgust at them (Dahl, 2018). If cringe is such an unpleasant feeling, why is #cringe content so popular on social media?

The *finsta* allows the audience to cringe vicariously and develop a sense of solidarity because it reinforces how 'human' we are: embarrassing moments, mistakes, out-of-pocket ideas, and more. When we collectively laugh at such experiences, we bond over our shared human frailty and recognise that we have all arrogantly argued for something only to realise that it was ignorant or, we have all tried to present ourselves as 'cool' and 'likeable' and 'talented'. This shared absurdity, insecurity, and ridiculousness makes one feel less alone and more 'real'. The creation of a *finsta* points towards a desire to maintain this candidness online.

However, such a solidarity can only exist in a space that accepts common values and habits, which as mentioned before, is deeply entrenched in one's social background as Bourdeiu (1985) suggests. For example, laughing at sexist TikTok videos is only possible when someone has the privilege to recognise and reject regressive values, underscoring how cringe is influenced by social position. So, capturing and showcasing one's cringe moments becomes a mirror of both shared humanity and entrenched social

103

divides on *finstas*. This public-private dichotomy also suggests that people tend to place certain relationships as more valuable than other connections; ranking some relationships higher than others based on 'closeness', 'intimacy', and 'trust' and these privileged few have access to our 'cringe moments'.

For the sociologist, this idea of embarrassment or cringe serves a social purpose as it lays down the norms and rules that govern, mediate, and structure spaces of social interaction (Walther, 2008, 2007; De Certeau, 1984; Goffman, 1956). This essay shows how the online world is no exception because symbolic boundaries in the physical world can map onto virtual spaces similarly occupied by humans. The *(f)insta* as phenomena shows us how members of this social group come to form similar understands of "symbolic meanings that are represented in the cultural milieu" and reproduce or imitate "the characteristics that are considered to be central to the culture" (Wan *et al*. 2013, p. 247; Goffman, 1956). We see how members attempt to deviate from these norms (De Certeau, 1984) and go "backstage" (Goffman, 1956).

Thus, irrespective of whether the account is curated or not, it visually reinforces markers of class positions through the clothes they wear, the food they eat, the activities they participate in, and the language they deploy. This leads to the persistence of symbolic boundaries that gatekeeper content as well as social circles while making it difficult for groups to coalesce, overlap, and restrict mobility. Symbolic boundaries that exist in the physical world are thus successfully able to superimpose on virtual worlds— a space that was initially presumed to be free for all and democratising turns out to be embedded in the same social hierarchies it sought to move away from.

104

IV. CONCLUSION

To conclude, I will quote one of my respondents who said: "On Instagram, you are who you Follow". This statement adds value to the well-known saying, 'Show me your friends and I will tell you who you are.' Through an assessment of Bourdieu's theory on tastes and preferences, this essay has tried to show how people on social media platforms, like Instagram, can maintain and reinforce pre-existing group formations, rooted in shared behaviours, cultural capital, and habitus. This dynamic suggests that

Filtered Self: navegando no Instagram por contas públicas e privadas| Acharya

Passagens: Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação da Universidade Federal do Ceará, v. 15, n.2. Especial, 2024

far from being neutral, granting access to content on Instagram helps construct and negotiate symbolic boundaries.

Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts, it becomes evident that Instagram interactions are governed by a framework of distinction where tastes and preferences signal belonging or exclusion – between insiders and outsiders, between core and peripheral groups, and between 'us' and 'them'. The creation of *finstas* – private accounts that deviate from the polished 'public' norms – may initial appear as a rebellion against these norms (De Certeau, 1984). However, as Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical model reveals, even these "backstage" spaces involve a curated performance, tailored for a select audience, demonstrating that the dichotomy of 'real' versus 'fake' Instagram is not as liberating as it seems. Instead, it mirrors the broader societal structures of self-presentation and distinction through everyday online practices. When we actively participate in presenting curated versions of the self, based on the audience, we manage and manipulate information that we consciously choose to share in a specific (visual) language of articulation.

Dahl's idea of cringe further illustrates how interactions are policed through emotions like embarrassment and judgement. Cringe, whether compassionate or contemptuous, reinforces norms and rules that govern, mediate, and shape social interaction (Walther, 2008; Wan, 2013; De Certeau, 1984; Goffman, 1956). The instant accessibility of personal narratives in the form of photos and videos encourages users to constantly think about an objectified, third-person perspective of themselves even when they are behind the scenes. Instagram's algorithmic design and metrics of popularity (eg. likes, comments, views, followers) continue to incentivize users to seek social approval and validation of their peers. Regardless of a public or private account, findings from this study confirm that users actively participate in idealised self-presentation even when it may appear to be otherwise. Adherence to these social norms and aesthetic standards is rewarded in ostensibly private spaces and digital identity formation becomes a careful, methodical, and approval-seeking act.

Thus, irrespective of whether the Instagram grid is pleasing to the eye or not, we maintain personal identities through symbolic boundaries of online socialisation. By empirically studying the phenomena of *finstas*, the essay attempts to show how a space

that was initially presumed to be judgement-free turns out to be embedded in the same social structures it sought to move away from. That is, the dichotomy of 'real' versus 'fake' Instagram does not entirely remove users from social norms of self-presentation but leads to the creation of and participation in new, separate, and controlled social spaces.

Further research could expand on these findings by exploring how geographic, economic, and cultural differences influence digital self-presentation. For example, a comparative study of user segments across geographies could unpack whether an urban-rural dichotomy exists (and how it plays out) in the presumably equalising world of the internet to unpack the intersection between global information flow and local adaptations (Appadurai, 1990, 1996; Hofstede, 2001). Similarly, a semiotic investigation on emerging digital dialects and lexical registers influenced by short-form content on TikTok could map speech styles to signify membership in social groups (Duan, 2023). Additionally, as 'iPad babies' or Gen Alpha becomes the first generation to grow up entirely in a digital-first world, behavioural research could reveal cognitive and attitudinal shifts driven by interactive technologies. Finally, understanding how social media users negotiate control and consent over their data amidst widespread tracking practices could sheld light on social dynamics of trust, freedom of expression, and user autonomy (Zuboff, 2019; Acquisto *et al,* 2006). These subjects of inquiry are critical to unpack evolving social dynamics in the digital age.

V. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

VI. NOTE

A shorter version of this essay was virtually presented at the University of Michigan's conference on *Social Media and Society in India* (2023).

PASSAGENS
Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação – UFC

REFERENCES

APPADURAI, Arjun. Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. **Theory, Culture & Society**, v. 7, n. 2–3, p. 295–310, 1990.

APPADURAI, Arjun. **Modernity at Large:** Cultural Dimensions of Globalization. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

ACQUISTI, Alessandro; GROSS, Ralph. Imagined Communities: Awareness, Information Sharing, and Privacy on the Facebook. In: DANEZIS, George; GOLLE, Philippe (ed.). **Privacy Enhancing Technologies. PET 2006. Lecture Notes in Computer Science**. v. 4258. Springer, 2006.

BOURDIEU, Pierre. **Distinction:** A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste. Tradução: Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.

BROSIUS, Christian. **India's Middle Class:** New Forms of Urban Leisure, Consumption and Prosperity. New Delhi: Routledge, 2010.

DAHL, Melissa. **Cringeworthy:** A Theory of Awkwardness. New York: Portfolio, 2018.

DE CERTEAU, Michel. **The Practice of Everyday Life**. Tradução: Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

DIMAGGIO, Paul; HARGITTAI, Ester; NEUMAN, W. Russell; ROBINSON, John P. Social Implications of the Internet. **Annual Review of Sociology**, v. 27, n. 1, p. 307–336, 2001.

DUAN, Chuxuan. TikTok: A New Way of English Learning. **Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences**, v. 8, p. 127–133, 2023.

ELLISON, Nichole B.; STEINFIELD, Charles; LAMPE, Cliff. The Benefits of Facebook "Friends": Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites. **Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication**, v. 12, n. 4, p. 1143–1168, 2007.

GOFFMAN, Erving. **The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life**. University of Edinburgh, 1956.

HOFSTEDE, Geert. **Culture's Consequences:** Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2001.

HUMPHREYS, Lee. **The Qualified Self:** Social Media and the Accounting of Everyday Life. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018.

LAMONT, Michèle; MOLNÁR, Virág. The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences. **Annual Review of Sociology**, v. 28, p. 167–195, 2002.

LI, Na; RODRIGUEZ, Guillermo Romera; XU, Yuqiao; BHATT, Parth; NGUYEN, Huy Anh. Picturing One's Self: Camera Use in Zoom Classes during the COVID-19 Pandemic. **Proceedings of the 9th ACM Conference on Learning @ Scale**, p. 151–162, 2022.

107

MERTON, Robert K. Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge. **American Journal of Sociology**, v. 78, n. 1, p. 9–47, 1972.

MISYAK, Jennifer B.; MELKONYAN, Tigran; ZEITOUN, Hossam; CHATER, Nick. Unwritten Rules: Virtual Bargaining Underpins Social Interaction, Culture, and Society. **Trends in Cognitive Sciences**, v. 18, n. 10, p. 512–519, 2014.

NORTH, Sue; SNYDER, Ilana; BULFIN, Scott. Digital Tastes: Social Class and Young People's Technology Use. **Information, Communication & Society**, v. 11, n. 7, p. 895–911, 2008.

OWENS, Jay. Post-Authenticity and the Ironic Truths of Meme Culture. In: BOWN, Alfie; BRISTOW, Dan (ed.). **Seizing the Memes of Production**. Punctum Books, 2019. p. 77–113.

SITOMPUL, Lola Uatama; NOVIANI, Fitri; SEMBIRING, Santana. Constructing Self Identity through Social Media: In the Perspective of Gen Z. **Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Law, Social Sciences and Education**, 2023.

UTZ, Sonia. Show Me Your Friends and I Will Tell You What Type of Person You Are: How One's Profile, Number of Friends, and Type of Friends Influence Impression Formation on Social Network Sites. **Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication**, v. 15, p. 314–335, 2010.

VALENZUELA, Sebastian; PARK, Namsu; KEE, Kerk F. Is There Social Capital in a Social Network Site? Facebook Use and College Students' Life Satisfaction, Trust, and Participation. **Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication**, v. 14, n. 4, p. 875–901, 2009.

VEENSTRA, Gerry. Can Taste Illumine Class? Cultural Knowledge and Forms of Inequality. **Canadian Journal of Sociology**, v. 30, n. 3, 2005.

WALTHER, Joseph B. Selective Self-Presentation in Computer-Mediated Communication: Hyperpersonal Dimensions of Technology, Language, and Cognition. **Computers in Human Behaviour**, v. 23, p. 2538–2557, 2007.

WALTHER, Joseph B.; VAN DER HEIDE, Brandon; KIM, Sang Yeon; WESTERMAN, David; TONG, Stephanie Tom. The Role of Friends' Appearance and Behavior on Evaluations of Individuals on Facebook: Are We Known by the Company We Keep? **Human Communication Research**, v. 31, p. 28–49, 2008.

WAN, Ching; CHEW, Pony Yuen-Ga. Cultural Knowledge, Category Label, and Social Connections: Components of Cultural Identity in the Global, Multicultural Context. **Asian Journal of Social Psychology**, v. 13, p. 247–259, 2013.

YATES, Simeon; LOCKLEY, Eleanor. Social Media and Social Class. **American Behavioral Scientist**, p. 1–26, 2018.

YATES, Simeon; KIRBY, John; LOCKLEY, Eleanor. Digital Media Use: Differences and Inequalities in Relation to Class and Age. **Sociological Research Online**, v. 20, n. 4, p. 71–91, 2015.

ZUBOFF, Shoshana. **The Age of Surveillance Capitalism**. London: Profile Books, 2019.

108

Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação – UFC

_____

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Swasti Acharya
Design & Behaviour Science Researcher at Fractal.ai. MA in Sociology from Jawaharlal Nehru University. BA in Sociology & Anthropology from Ashoka University.
ResearchGate: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Swasti-Acharya
E-mail: swasti.acharya@alumni.ashoka.edu.in

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

_____

109