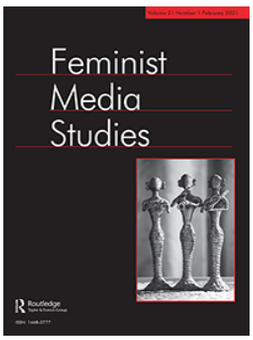

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COMMENTARY AND CRITICISM

Cultural cringe: how caste and class affect the idea of culture in social media

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TikTok is a necessary platform in cultural production. With its affordance of a quick 15 second video, automatic sound, availability of a range of sounds (including regional music/sounds) and in-built effects and edits, TikTok has become a hit across countries, regions, and classes. There is a stream of TikTok videos coming from the inner cities, towns, and villages in India with just one purpose—entertainment and self-expression. These videos usually have content creators "ploughing in their fields, cooking in their one-room homes, or making bricks" (J. Yadav 2020a). This content is not "poverty porn" or an attribute they wish to hide but exists as something they want to put out on the internet and are not ashamed of. Its global reach is evident in many of these videos being replicated by the global audience. It quickly found favor with global content creators who would use the same sound as used by a popular Indian TikTok-creator to create their own version of it. They are not doing it in jest but accepting it as culture.

As an example, when content creator Sumita Sikdar lip-synced to popular Indian music from Bollywood, she became an immediate hit on the platform. Another user, FunBucketBhargav, banking on his and his peers' accent, made the "Oh my god" phrase a hit across countries. Sikdar does not film herself in the corner of a high-end house but is often engaged in household tasks while shooting these videos. Her TikTok feed does not have an "aesthetic" element like that of many social media influencers. Some used popular meme formats, some acted out a scene of betrayal from a lover, some enacted a story of sacrifice and love—TikTok became an active platform for budding artists to showcase their talent, no matter where they come from. The people in the afore-mentioned videos and similar videos did not belong to the English-speaking upper caste and upper class set of people that are used to being the echo chamber of most social media sites, whether through culture or political opinion. These are not people looking to create a beautiful and aesthetically pleasing timeline—as is expected on Instagram (influencer style)—but are only concerned about expressing themselves. When they find expression through TikTok in a way that is diametrically opposite to what the dominant cultural class wants, it is labeled as cringe. In the age of social media activism, we hear the voices of those in marginalized communities only when they protest an injustice. On this platform, they contribute to the cultural voice of marginalized communities—putting them at the forefront of cultural production, given the popularity of TikTok.

The word "cringe" is specifically directed to these videos because of the people involved in it, their mise en scène, their accents, or the video content itself. Sample this

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tweet thread from Abhishek Baxi, a digital consultant and technology journalist with a blue tick on Twitter:

> Lame YouTube "celebs" and cringe TikTok "stars" arguing with each other about who's more entertaining and who gets more brand associations is everything you need to know about India's media consumption and the business. The success of mediocrity and random content is celebrated in the name of representation across classes and communities. Democratization could use a better showcase, really. YouTube folks have long enjoyed being dramatic like K-serials. They've juse gotten someone new to diss. TikTok folks thrive on such moronity anyway. (sic)

The words used here are "cringe," "mediocrity," "better showcase," "moronity" describe how the dominant cultural class wants to define what is acceptable.

Another popular internet personality, Elvish Yadav, took to YouTube to "roast" TikTok videos where he compared the young men and women appearing on TikTok videos to "ragpickers" and "giant barrel" (E. Yadav 2020b). When called out on it, he defended his comments by saying you must call a spade a spade (E. Yadav 2020c). In an interview with Jyoti Yadav for *The Print* online magazine, urban TikTok creators called out the "lower caste creators" for their "frivolous" and "cringe" videos, emphasizing that no one from the upper caste would ever make such videos. For them, it was lip syncing to *Gully Boy* raps that was more legitimate content (J. Yadav 2020a). In fact, now deleted tweets show that TikTok content creators were dubbed as the "shudras" of the internet, with YouTube and Instagram given to Brahmins, Twitter to Kshatriya, and Facebook as Vaishyas.

One of the dominant ways the Indian public practices exclusion way of the caste system and in the treatment of religious minorities. Casteist practices are prevalent not only explicitly by way of denying opportunities to the lower castes by also in institutionalized casteism. This discrimination becomes national interest only when it makes headlines outside of the country, as demonstrated by the recent discrimination case at Cisco in the United States. In India itself, Dr. Payal Tadvi and Rohith Vemula continue to be remembered mostly on social media—but only in certain activism discourses.

The use of social media is key in the opportunities that those within the country as well the diaspora can engage with issues of caste on a more global platform. While the voice remains of those who have faced discrimination being from lower castes, the transnational communities offer a way to amplify that voice without taking the mic away. This is especially evident in the CISCO case where, as soon as it was reported by the American media, it became a trending topic of conversation with many opinion pieces about the prevalence of caste in India and the diaspora, getting published across international media. However, the voice of all of those included in the subaltern is always only seen in the context of protest or a social movement. When one talks about culture, the upper caste and upper class still has a dominating presence in deciding what is canonical and worth watching. Even as Bollywood and streaming sites explore small towns and tier-II cities, putting in focus the class struggle, the surnames remained limited to Tripathi, Sharma, Dubey, Mishra, Kaushik—all indicating a strong Brahmin presence. Many of these characters also sport a *janeu* that further solidifies their upper-caste position. (R. Shinde 2018)

In spite of being labeled as "cringe" or being lower culture, subsequently attributed to lower caste, by the flagbearers of culture on social media, TikTok became an important form of self-expression for many across the country, with their mise-en-scène being cattle,

agricultural fields, and lower-income households. In India, these TikTok videos have highlighted the influence of class and caste in deciding what culture is and how an emergence of these videos on a transnational platform redefines the idea of India globally.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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