

EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH INSTAGRAM POSTS: A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF #SAREESANDSTORIES

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Abstract

The use of Instagram is an existing trend for individuals who are seeking information and visual gratification. Such technology holds promise for improving women engagement and empowerment as well as community building. The study examines the Instagram account of a prominent Malaysian influencer - *#Sareesandstories*, who through her narrative storytelling posts, highlight issues concerning women and question societies' construction of identity for Indian women. Textual and visual analysis on the Instagram posts was carried out to determine the behaviors and themes that emerged. In-depth interview with the influencer herself was also conducted to delve deeper into understanding . culture and identity as highlighted. Findings reveal that Instagram has truly allowed women a platform to express themselves in a society which would not otherwise allow them to do so. The ability to engage with other like minded women around the world on pivotal issues, the need for openness and to not be judged for doing so is what this account has allowed women to do proves that technology can create a positive tribe.

Keywords: empowerment; Instagram; Indian, stereotypes, identity.

1. Introduction

Instagram is a social media platform centralized around the image. It acts as a digital album where users create a public or private account to share photographs and videos while featuring an image with a single caption where users can “like,” repost, tag, direct message (DM) or comment on a post. Instagram reinforces how social media play an undeniably large role in how people connect virtually and in person. Instagram focuses on the image, making it a particularly rich object of inquiry and a very popular and powerful means of self-representation through selfies, image curating, and self-branding. Individuals participate in social media such as Instagram dialogues to ratify unique needs, for example: convenience, identity, peer pressure, as well as “personal fulfillment, social surveillance, expression/affiliation, self-documentation, letting off steam, and anti-media sentiment” (Johnson & Kane 2010: 3-4).

This platform is currently seeing a different sort of change. One which many women are struggling with which is the re-construction of self and identity. The most important measure of women being empowered in the use of technology such as that of Instagram should be the

extent to which it enables woman to interpret, apply and enforce laws of their own making, incorporating their own voices, values and concerns (Bhuyan, 2006 :63).

1.1 Empowerment

To support women's empowerment requires greater engagement. Empowerment enables one to understand what makes change happen in their lives. The classic idea of empowerment is gaining the material means to empower themselves (women) as individuals and putting this to the service of their families and communities. Studies have neglected what women are doing for and by themselves to bring about change in their own and others women 's lives. According to Bhuyan (2006) empowerment refers to being self dependent by providing access to all the freedoms and opportunities which they were denied in the past. In the specific sense, women empowerment refers to enhancing their position in the power structure of society. This also means that women have the power or capacity to regulate their day to day lives in sociopolitical and economic terms having a power which enables them to move from the periphery to center stage as mentioned by Erwin Goffman. But this may not be possible if women continue to play to a more patriarchal drumbeat rather than her own.

1.2 Research Question and Objective

The study explored the self-presentation of the Indian culture and women's identity on Instagram to gain more insight into how this practice leads to empowering women with a voice. The goal of this is to investigate the purpose and characteristics of Instagram use in relation to the construction of an online self, drawing from Goffman's (1959) theory of the representation of the self, which implies that individuals are constantly performing and shaping their own digital self through actions and interactions. It then takes a turn in analysing the relationship between Instagram and the usage in addressing women and cultural stereotypes, as it will analyse the important themes that arose from this particular Instagram account and will explore the socio cultural characteristics that manifests itself through Instagram photos and captions. In this study the researchers explore the use of technology as a platform of change beyond deliberate and planned interventions. This is also a good time as there seems to be a shift in societal and cultural norms where Indian women who were bound by tradition and societal expectations use new technological platforms to express themselves and voice their opinions.

2 Methodology

#Sareesandstories is the name of the Instagram page written and posted by Sumitra Selvaraj. All her posts are about her in a saree, talking about the drape, the texture, colour and or weave. Along the way she includes stories and anecdotes of various issues including the social perception of draping sarees to family and culture, identity and ultimately, female empowerment. On Instagram, she has almost 11,000 followers and receives hundreds of messages with saree-related questions and stories from fellow enthusiasts. She started the Instagram account, initially to document her sarees and eventually evolved into various other topics of interest which resonated with other Instagram users including the fact that “wearing a saree had her “going through the same deft motions that connects centuries of Indian women all the way back to the Indus Valley civilisation”. Along the way her posts tackles current issues and delves into the concept of identity. This particular Instagrammer was selected for her activity level on Instagram, and the number of Instagram followers she had. The researchers also wanted to explore the possibility of using a traditional icon such as the saree on a modern platform such as Instagram to create a voice amongst women.

2.1 Textual Analysis

In order to answer the research questions, this study used a qualitative textual analysis approach of *#sareesandstories* Instagram. Modeling the current study on a study by Stever and Lawson (2013), the authors did textual analysis to effectively analyze the said Instagram account. Textual analysis was employed to explore the issues discussed. Textual analysis is generally used for "sorting messages into different categories according to some set of classification criteria" (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009, p. 42). A textual analysis will be used to look at themes and engagement of the case with respect to Indian women, identity formation and empowerment through the Instagram account. The researchers immerse themselves fully into the study using a natural setting and analyzed through an interpretive lens. Thus, the researchers employed a textual analysis to discover themes and patterns that emerged from the use of captions by the Instagrammer on her Instagram photos. This enabled the researchers to also capture how the Instagrammer was enacting self-presentation through her text as well as her photographs.

2.2 Indepth Interview

It helped to ‘ learn about people’s elicited narrative ad representations of their social world, including beliefsm ideologies, justifications, motivations and aspirations’ (Boellstorff, Nardi,

Pearce and Taylor 2012 :93). The questions were designed based on literature review of previous studies done and findings from the textual analysis of the Instagram posts. The actual interview took place in June of 2018. This interview was audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. Transcripts were later checked to match against audio records (Kurasaki 2000). The transcripts were coded based on a preset list of themes which arose from the textual analysis of the Instagram posts.

2.3 Data Collection

Researchers sampled only 50 posts from 15th May 2016 to 30th June 2018 will allow the researcher to only look at themes and engagement during that time so it is manageable to gather information. Photographs and captions were analyzed separately using separate schemes and analyses. The reason for analyzing the elements separately attributes to the two not always being correlated. Separate analysis of the two elements allows for full and independent analysis. Any video, graphic, or text/meme was discarded from the analysis as did collage pictures and pictures with no captions. A total of 50 photographs were analyzed

3. Findings

The findings revealed that the Instagram posts was a way of historically documenting the everyday life of an Indian woman in a saree. The saree being an Indian attire is seen as a societal construction of ‘the good Indian woman’ who is family oriented, pious or ‘temple going’, seen but not heard, married or at a marrying age, not opinionated and dependent on male support (this can be father, brother or husband). In contradiction, the six yards of fabric is also seen by society as an attire that exemplifies a woman’s sexuality and objectifies her on the male gaze. The fact that this six yards of fabric can be woven to mean different things to different people and yet bind a woman to suppression is an interesting unfolding of various issues and elements that needs to be looked at. The Instagram posts and interview seem to share a common thread which is to address issues which seem important to any woman – that of societal constructs of how and what a woman should be.

The textual analysis of the Instagram post therefore led to eight categories of the following: *Career posts* involved anything related to being a producer (authors job), environment she works in, *Relationship* content included relationships with husband, mother, mother-in-law or grandmother, *Tradition* content included ancestry, roots, migration, immigrant, culture or beliefs, *Identity* content include being a woman, wife, married, divorcee, *Personal* content

involves everything that the readers may not know about such as character traits, vocal, opinionated, intimidating, head strong, *Fashion and Style* posts include explanation on saree draping, colour, weave, fabric use, and blouse, *education* posts include learning process, decision making, values, making sense of things and *Issues post* involved issues that deemed important that needed to be discussed and this included current issues which were being highlighted globally. The categories developed were interwoven with each other that each post was not able to be distinguished as having solely one category.

Based on the intagram posts and interview, it can be clearly noticed that the most common use of Instagram by the author is to document her everyday saree drapes. This is evident in the first six months of regular posting which the author only talks about the saree she is wearing, the colour and weave. Eventually, she realizes that she also wanted to talk about her day and went on incorporating her ‘saree of the day’ with little anecdotes of happenings at home or at work. Through these posts readers are introduced to her married life, her relationship with her husband mother, late father and grandmother and an introduction to her ancestry which seem to set the setting and contribute to her identity as a career woman and Indian at that. She clearly states that she is by far not a good example to being a traditional Indian woman except her ability to speak Tamil, wear a saree and a ‘*pottu*’ on her forehead.

Based on the analysis of the intagram posts, wearing a saree is a personalized decision that every woman should be able to make. Simple decisions made by a woman in wearing a saree should be self choice. ‘*Don’t wear it for me or anyone else. Wear it because you want to*’ and wearing a saree for yourself is a start of empowering a woman to make her own decision in other matters of her life. The Instagrammer stressed this point in a post with the hashtag #kecualisaree when government departments were on a furror over womens use of the saree. The author, Sumitra wrote :

‘The initial ruling was made by narrow minded morons, but the greater error was in issuing a non sensical, defensive explanation. Either way, I have no respect for the way they handled the situation. But do keep in mind that they retracted the initial dress code and issued a new, more inclusive one’.

The utterance above seems to have an underlying meaning of cultural feminism where it revalidates what they consider undervalued female attributes. It emphasizes the variance between men and women but considers that variance to be mentally, psychologically, and to be culturally created rather than the natural characteristic. The author has used negative

connotations on people from the societal norms who follows the customarily and culturally created norms rather than respecting an individual's desires and preferences.

I've been reading comments and critiques from people who are baying for blood. Apparently their cultural right and tradition has been decimated and they want an eye for an eye. Really? This is what your tradition teaches you? To be rude and vindictive? Do you really need to compare lacy kebayas to corset backed Saree blouses? Does that help? Does it help to call others names? Is this becoming of your precious cultural upbringing?

Formation of questions by author indicates the deepening frustration that she has for the set of people in the society who feels and believe that their cultural norms are the best compared to the rest. "woman" is always a debatable category, complicated by class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other facets of identity. The author in her utterances above used descriptive connotations of "Lacy Kebayas" and "corset backed Sari blouses" to show how suppression and controls on women attire from two different ethnicity is seen. The question posed also indicates that the author is educating the critics that their opinion on women and their dressing should not be addressed in a negative lime light as your opinion and actions portrays on your own respective upbringing.

I have worn a Saree to work for more than 80% of the time for the last 15 years. I have endured sexist and racist comments from all manner of people, Indians included. 'Oh, your Tamil is quite English accented, but you are wearing a Saree? 'Ohh, you are divorced, but wearing a Saree and pottu, are you available? 'Oh, you are drinking whisky but weparing a Saree, isn't that being disrespectful?' These are just some of the gems from Indian people who have decided to be my moral police. I ignore it all, because no one has the right to dictate my choice of outfit, or lifestyle.

Words like "English accent", "Divorcee", "Drinking Whisky" seems to be negative connotations that do not seem to go with the traditional norms of culture and values. In her posts and indepth interview she stresses that she is a *Malaysian woman*, Indian but 'cannot identify with the traits of a 'typical' Indian woman' in that she is far from the ideals of society of what an Indian woman should be such as 'prim and proper' or 'a homemaker' demonstrating herself as 'a vocal woman', 'opinionated', '40 year old woman who is not typically shaped/sized/dressed'.

As a career woman and one she considers 'priveledged', she constantly is reflective on championing values in society and sharing with people that there needs to be a greater purpose than just being. She constantly narrates the need for women to be themselves but addresses that 'women go through judgemental nonsense just for choosing to be themselves' and advising that 'you (women) cannot expect men to change entitled behaviour if women still inflict it upon their

own'. This she stresses to the fact that many women intend to put other women down with their judgements and stereotypes and this is seen through 'unsolicited' and 'unwelcome' behaviour such as asking her to wear a different saree blouse or to wear brighter colours.

Clearly her utterance here strongly stress the fact that people should be accountable for what they say online as is what one needs to wear. This is clearly seen in her post where she states *'Let people wear what they want; you draw inspiration from them if it suits you, give credit where it is due, and if you want, bestow genuine, heartfelt compliments. There are no 'musts' really, so don't ever be afraid to be yourself ♡*

The self-presentation is seen as a process that becomes an ever-evolving cycle in which the individual's identity is introduced, compared, adapted or justified on the background of different realities: social, cultural, economic, as well as political (Papacharissi 2011: 304). This is what Goffman called the 'information game': "a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery" (Goffman 1959: 20). In this analysis, the author makes it is clear that she has evolved over time and age has played an important role in this change as she mentions in her post :

'I dedicated a lot of time in my twenties and early thirties seeking forgiveness for who I was. Along the way, I lost myself. It was easier to apologise and change, rather than stand my ground and fight for my values. And I think, as women, this is something that we are all too familiar with. But you know what happens as you grow older in the company of the right people? You stop being so concerned about looking after others, and start focusing on yourself'.

In our set of multicultural society the traditional notion of feminism which focuses on identity rather than the individual's condition allows society to neither empathize nor sympathize the individual who is being criticized. The expression "Oh you are ... this and your are that" or forcing women to a dress code or having a date to mark the importance of the dress code "wear a Saree on the 1st of July 'in solidarity'", is a undesirable and destructive power structure and that it is responsible for oppression and inequality.

How many times have you stood in front of the mirror and adjusted your Saree so that it's not too revealing?... I've tugged up the edge of my Saree so that the top of my bust is hidden, and I've hiked up the part that winds around my waist so that there isn't too much skin on display. I've checked and rechecked if my bra lines are showing, or worse, if a strap has the temerity to peek out. And I am tired of adjusting. I am tired of taking on the burden of covering myself up so that I won't ignite the passions of a poor defenceless man. And I am sure as hell tired of draping my Saree properly to avoid busybody aunties from coming and lending a 'helping' hand... I will INSIST that we keep revisiting this topic over and over again, until there comes a time when a woman can look in the mirror and just smile at her reflection, rather than being worried about the repercussions of what she chooses to wear.

Adjusting Saree, food, customs, lifestyle or attire marks the identity of some region class or ethnicity. When the author says about standing in front of the mirror to adjust the saree here is not on a literal understanding that we need to look good or placing the right edges appropriately but it's about covering yourself in a two piece outfit, making yourself follow the traditional norms of wearing a saree. Not reveling your body too much as society would portray you negatively. Your attire needs to carry your self-identity that relies entirely on the cultural mindset of people. Wearing a saree in any way, shape or form from the regular equals to an immoral or a bad girl type.

The utterance above shows descriptively action words that stresses up a women who wants to wear a sari but keeping in mind all the rules and regulation and the norms of a saree and its significant to the culturally manmade standard customary values. The above utterance also peaks at the body parts of a women which is seen as sexual erotic or voluptuous. The question here is who made all this as an essential need to satisfy what others sees it as a good culture value/norms.

The author seems to be frustrated and tired of following the rules. *"I am tired of taking on the burden of covering myself up so that I won't ignitee passions of a poor defenseless man."* She shows her heartfelt disappointment satisfying the needs of society. The question here is why should we be stressed out or why should a women care or give up her desires just to abide to society's meaningless ideologies. Why should we women be penalized for the desires that makes men weaker? These questions do not seem to fit the context of the culturally formed theories that a women should be dressed specifically in a specific set of attire that satisfies everyone's eyes. The authors personal belief of women and power, strengths, freedom, status and class doesn't seem to penetrate the culturally bounded ideologies that cannot be adjusted as it will or might look wrong if changed or adjusted. The utterances conveyed is literally the author feeling tired of satisfying the needs of the culturally set standards of tying a saree. Words such as *"busybody aunties"* is a symbolic piece of rumored thought that has been viewed negatively by all Indian origin girls as these aunties are representation of social whose task is to be the 'moral police' of Indian cultural norms and values to be uphold in the wearing of traditional attire especially to represent the origins and the taste of class in the name of virtues. The author also tends to mention that the judgements on other women do not only come from men but also women.

The findings clearly indicates that the author is persistent on not just being true to herself but employs the idea that all women should empower themselves with some amount of dignity, self esteem and confidence in carrying themselves without worrying about the constructions of society. *“We are ALL guilty of hanging on to things, sometimes it is material, sometimes it is emotional. ..I've come to learn that you MUST rid your life of baggage. If something does not add value to your life, it doesn't deserve your head space...”*The post reiterates the same fact by using words to empower women to give up negative feelings and emotions and live in the moment of positivism.

4. Conclusion

Discourse on tradition and modernity have existed simultaneously and often contradictory. A new global media such as Instagram provides the symbols, myths, resources, ideas and images for the construction of a common culture as well as of individual identities. The new middle class Indian emphasises all that is modern in the world today and this includes a view of the Indian woman that transcends the earlier perceived place of women in the domestic world. The case study of *#sareesandstories* explores the view of the modern Indian woman as having ‘substance’ and includes a more visible and public view of women in the workplace both within the new spheres of work and home. In a contemporary Indian community in Malaysia, old modes of contact such as religious practices, cultural traditions and social customs and new modes of contact such as education and media, shape, influence, structure and construct gender identity in particular and varied ways. The Indian woman in Malaysia of today although have cast of their age old shackles of serfdom and male domination, are still bound by societal judgements which have continued to prevail to ensure these women are not uplifted or their emancipation is ‘de-throned’. Concurring with Bhuyan (2006), the researchers reiterate that although their voice is now forceful and important to that of men – there are personal issues that are still being struggled with. These issues of self - worth, confidence, self - esteem, judgements, societal construction of roles and identity are still to be blamed.

The idea of empowerment for an Indian woman is based on three common well identifiable themes. An empowered woman should be financially independent, where she has the ability to earn her own living and not depend on anyone to hold her down because of the inability to financially support herself. Secondly the ability to be equipped with not just a paper qualification but positive worldly knowledge and the ability to use that knowledge to get around in life and thirdly the ability to have self esteem, to stand up for oneself, to make decisions and

take charge which includes the ability to construct our view of ourselves and our notion of the real. These three elements would allow a woman to accomplish what she set herself to do and enable one to break free from societal pressures. Nevertheless, as much as rural women will continue to be empowered with education and financial independence, the struggles of the urban Indian woman will be internal battles of identity and re-constructing meaning and self.

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