

CREATION AND CONSUMPTION OF CULTURAL ARTEFACTS IN THE AGE OF “INSTA-CULTURE”

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ABSTRACT

Cultural production is the process of creating artefact, and in this context, we mean media that represent our society. In the current scenario, under the profound influence of ‘convergence culture’ and ‘user-generated content’, the creation and consumption of various media products such as photographs, music, films are undergoing rapid changes. The ‘media consumption practices’ are getting redefined with the profound influence of corporate cultural products. These cultural products remain dependent on new media practices that are driven under the deep-rooted practices of sociality, cultural performances and identity constructions. With the expansion of digital spaces, the socio-cultural structures are not remaining insulated from the heartfelt influence of technical network structure. These spaces are enabling a new mode of convergence which has a characteristic of ‘integrated sociality’. This paper is an attempt to theorize the changing landscape of Northeast India via Instagram’s medium and to display the world what North-East is. For this study, the researcher had randomly selected Instagram accounts and segmented it into different categories related to scenic locations, traditional practices, food habits, music, textiles and apparels and the fashion statements from the region.

Keywords: Instagram, Convergence Culture, Digi-Driven Society, Integrated Sociality, North-East

INTRODUCTION

“Cultural production” is an evolving and dynamic process that creates multiple artefacts. Under this evolutionary process media holds a significant position. To understand media with socio-cultural ventricle it’s not only a system of technologies rather it’s a techno-social systems. This system allows information and communication technologies to create culture that are more democratized and convergent in nature. This form of ‘Digi-Driven’ society is highly influenced by computerization. As Manovich (2001: 19) states: “Today we are in the middle of a new media revolution - the shift of all culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution, and communication.” This culture has been enumerated by different scholars in multiple manners. Levy (2001) labelled it as ‘cyber-culture’, ‘interface culture’ by Johnson (1997), Castells (2001) referred it as ‘Internet Culture’ and ‘information culture’ by Manovich (2001). According to Ross (1991), the advancement

of technology has given birth to a new culture which is refereed as digital culture and this culture involves circuit of cultural practices associated with advanced technology.

Under this new media revolution the cultural production which took place is participatory in nature and often involves ‘users, audiences, consumers, and followers’ in the creation of culture and content. The contents which are being created have core association of preservation, propagation and retention elements. Under this landscape of new media revolution the social media has extended its footprint across the multiple corridors of socio-cultural ecosystem. According to Mathew Allen (2012) and Trebor Scholz (2008) the roots of social media applications can be traced back to years earlier than 2005. From the period of 1990s the blogs were already around. In 1994 the first wiki technology was suggested by Ward Cunningham and it was released in 1995. Early social networking sites such as

Classmates and Six degrees mark their advent in year 1995 and 1997. The newer versions of social networking sites claim to be new but on other hand it had maintained the easy transition and the continuity.

Allen and Scholz, argue that the technologies that are associated with social media and web 2.0 are not new. During the period of 1990s these technologies were not popular in mass manner however with passing time things become popular. Subsequently in twenty-first century there has been a shift from HTML-based linking practices of open web source to the platform of liking and recommendations of close systems. This Web 2.0 platform propelled various social networking websites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter etc. in publishing and producing content in multiple forms be it text, videos and images. For this study the researcher has taken select sample from the popular social networking site Instagram. It has become a major dais to decipher artifacts such as images and the videos. Instagram has marked its advent on 2010; during that period it had about 30 million user bases. However with the passage of time it has grown up and currently it holds active users strength of more than a billion. In 2012 popular social networking site Facebook bought Instagram for \$1 billion. The popularity of Instagram can be enumerated from its log in ratio. Over 60% of the users log in daily making it one of the second most engaged social media spaces after Facebook. On an average day about 80 million photos are shared.

Communication and Cultural spaces in DIGI-Driven Corridors

Edward Burnett Tylor (1871) defines culture as a complex process which includes *knowledge, belief, art, morals and other capabilities* acquired by man as a member of society. Culture and communication is an intermingling aspect that defines culture as a communication process and communication as a cultural process. Orientations towards culture have impacts on the users' choices on social networking platforms. The influence of new media on the society can be illustrated in terms of cognition, social effect and a form of aesthetics. This new media engineered in such a way that controls the principle of human society on the line of culture, politics, economy etc. According to Chen and Zhang (2010) new media has key characteristics of *digitality, interactivity,*

convergence, hyper textuality and virtuality. Each and every characteristic have their unique feature in formulating users' production and consumption choices in digital spaces. The convergence characteristic of new media defines as the way new media converges with various forms and functions of media and electronic communication. Interactivity as a characteristic defines the relationship between users and web system in terms of sharing of information. The hyper textuality helps in free flowing of large quantity of information freely and in an interconnected manner. This medium allows people to stay in touch and connected despite the cultural differences, boundaries and the distance. As stated by Chen (2008) social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram have allowed people from every single place of the world to represent themselves in their significant ways and stay touched in technological world.

From various studies it has been found that social media has a deep impact on the cultural adoption process. According to Elola & Oskoz (2009), the use of social media especially Blogging and Vlogging can have positive impacts on the intercultural relationship and also improve the degree of participant's intercultural communication competence. The social media also helps in building multicultural relationships. According to Seyfi & Guven (2016), social media plays a significant sector in building new forms of multicultural interactions apart from being regarded as an important tool in the sharing of messages. The DIGI-Driven corridors are enabling Digital Culture which is associated with the people's interaction on the corridors of beliefs, knowledge and people's participation on digital networks. This digital network creates new strain of cultural thoughts that has the key characteristics of opinion driver, key influencer and propagator. The internet has deeper association with cultural artefacts as 'cultural-products' can be reshaped into digital binaries and bit layouts which could be resembled at end user's computer, tablet and other mobile devices. This primarily happened with text and photographs and with the advancement of networked technology and bandwidth speeds it got expanded to the frontiers of music, animation, and film.

Emerging model of Social Media Communication

Social media in current scenario has some constitutive features in modern society. This feature works in an integrated manner such as integrated sociality, integrated roles and converging communication platform on social media (Fuchs, 2017).

According to '*integrated sociality*', social media has three modes of '*sociality cognition, communication and cooperation*'. An individual by applying his/her own cognition creates multimedia content on various social networking websites. The publishing helps them in communicating with larger audiences and creating content involving multiple authors. Advancement in the digital technology helped in intertwining the edges of '*cognition, communication and cooperation*' in one space.

While outlining the characteristic of social media the "integrated roles" is an important feature. In contemporary society there are different social roles which tend to converge in various social spaces. The edges between public life and private life are becoming blurred. Habermas (1984, 1987) identified systems (the economy, the state) and the life-world as central realms of modern society. This life-world can be further distinguished into culture and civil society. We act in different social roles such as employees and consumers in the economic systems, as citizens and clients in state system and activists in the socio-economic sphere. This form of "liquid sociality" allows users to partly act in different social roles in same social space. It means that social media are social spaces under which the social roles tend to converge and become integrated in single profile base.

The communication process on social media spaces in modern society works on structural level and these structural levels are 'state, economy, civil sphere and cultural spaces'. This structure is interrelated and acts as the multitude of processes. These processes allow myriad possible social purposes which are transcending in nature. An individual citizen can use it for communication with other citizens in the context of any number of social roles.

The academic engagement offers an understanding of the changing and evolving spaces associated with 'Digital Culture' specifically within the corridors of Instagram that promotes the "culture of visuality". The digital culture with the intertwining of visuality focuses on the production and reception of cultural artefacts in divergent forms. These forms are associated with the platform, which is not restrictive to any physical boundary.

This study has attempted to gaze into cultural practices specifically revolving around food, music, apparels, costume, scenic locations associated with the North-Eastern region. These cultural products in the age of 'convergence culture' offer media practices deeply associated with cultural performances and identity construction activities in the region that constitutes a plethora of community divergence. The study has also marked an entry-point towards web-space influence on the cultural production activities, conditioned by emerging trends that community and individual choose according to the technological affordances. According to Castell (1996), changes in human societies' organization rendered cultural effects that promote broader room for fluidity and features associated with an individual's identity enhancement towards cultural appetite. This cultural appetite in this age of 'convergence culture' is closely interlinked with artistic democratization and challenges familiar aesthetic conventions.

The engagement also offers anecdote towards the role of 'Insta-Culture' in popularizing distinctive forms of cultural artefacts specifically from this region for a broader audience. The newer frontiers of convergent technology compress time and space and offer interactive room for citizens across the physical boundaries and associate with multi-cultural spaces. The communication and interaction in such platform also influence the process of 'intercultural adoption'.

Instagram and its rationality for this Study

Instagram, has become one of the most resorted channels that embrace the "culture of visuality" and gained enough momentum due to the filters that create a nostalgic experience. This medium has key characteristics of opinion generation and act as the key influencer in '*psycho spaces*'. While

synthesizing the process of cultural production within DIGI-Driven corridor, the Instagram is a unique site for observation and has key characteristic of Convergence. Convergence has three important elements (*preservation, propagation and retention*) which act significantly in Digital and Cultural Spaces. The process of Instagramisation is changing the way we ponder into the cultural spaces.

One of the major arguments associated with the selection of Instagram for this study is to assess the role it plays in formulating the newer space for multicultural interactions among divergent communities residing in the region. Along with this it has become important to proliferate into the newer territories of “Instagramisation” and role it plays in digital cultural spaces.

From historical period the concept of North-East India has emerged in global sphere with vibrant cultural identities. The cultural heterogeneity has made its significant footprint on digital spaces also. Various social networking sites which work on DIGI-Driven corridors are allied with multiple artefacts in the form of texts, images and videos which represent scenic locations, traditional practices, food habits, music, textiles and apparels and the fashion statements.

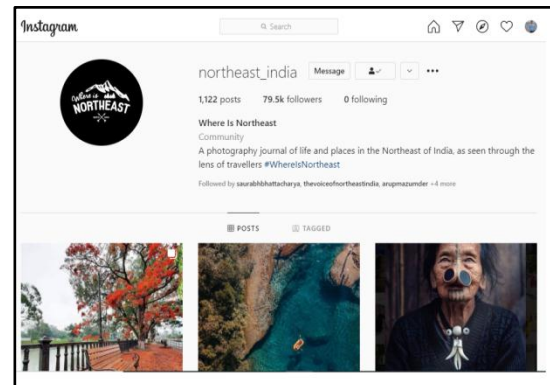
For this study, the researcher had randomly selected Instagram handles and segmented it into different categories related to scenic locations, traditional practices, food habits, music, textiles and apparels and the fashion statements from North-East India. With the emergence of digital spaces the cultural production practices are gaining newer platform which are not restrictive to physical boundaries and not remained specific towards community.

Instagram handles:

a. northeast India

This handle is mainly associated with the photographs reflecting life and places in NE India. Till 23/05/2021 there were about 1,122 posts and it is followed by 79.5k followers. This handle covers the picturesque location from the region. Most of the feeds are regular in nature and covers green lakes, dense forests and the beautiful hills. This handle offers platform to visualize vibrant locations, traditional foods, indigenous costumes, architecture, and rural settlement from

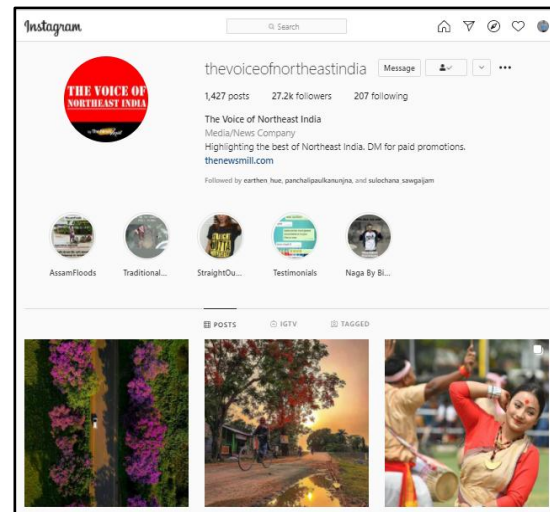
different parts of the region which offers the *Culture of Visuality* with a new height of vibrancy.



Source: <https://www.instagram.com/northeast India/>

b. the voice of north east India

This platform has 27.2k followers and mainly promotes indigenous and traditional apparels and customs. The posts are regular in nature and till 23/05/2021 it has about 1,427 posts. The posts highlight achievements and offer updates on current affair events mainly from the region. This handle has multitudinal approach in offering information pertaining to different locations, traditions, costume, food and embroidery.

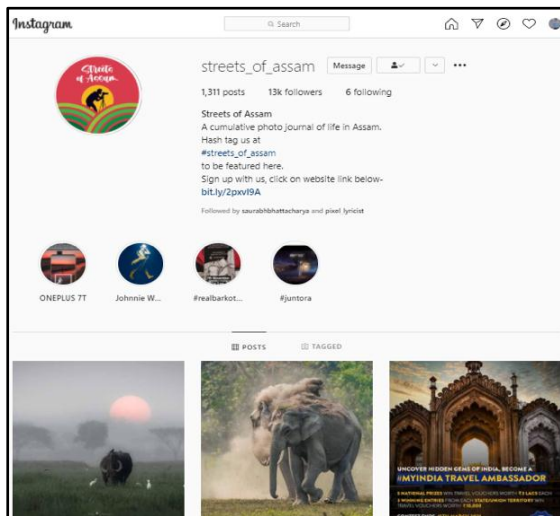


Source: <https://www.instagram.com/thevoiceofnortheastindia/>

c. streets_of_assam

This platform provides a glimpse of some of the undiscovered parts of Assam. There are about 13k followers and till 23/05/21 it has 1,311 posts. This Instagram handle is enabling young photographers to

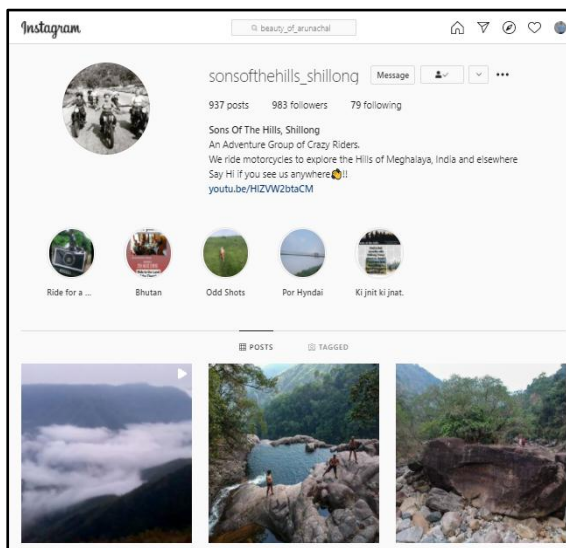
showcase their photographs and artistic creations for global audiences.



Source: https://www.instagram.com/streets_of_assam

d. sonsofthehills_shillong

This Instagram handle is run by bikers group from Shillong, Meghalaya. They ride motor bicycles across the region. Most of their story of adventure and roam expressed through their Instagram feeds. This handle has 983 followers and about 937 posts till 23/05/2021

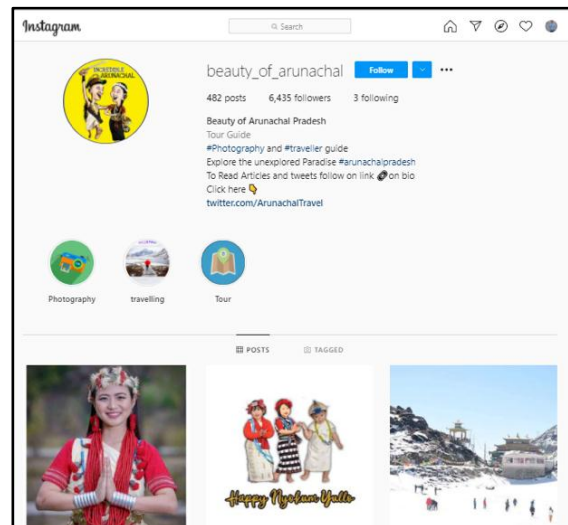


Source: https://www.instagram.com/sonsofthehills_shillong/

e. beauty_of_arunachal

The beauty of Arunachal manifests the people, the hills and the monasteries from Arunachal Pradesh. This Instagram page has about 6,435 followers and the feeds are regular in nature. There were 482 posts till 23/05/21. Places such as Ziro, Mechuka and

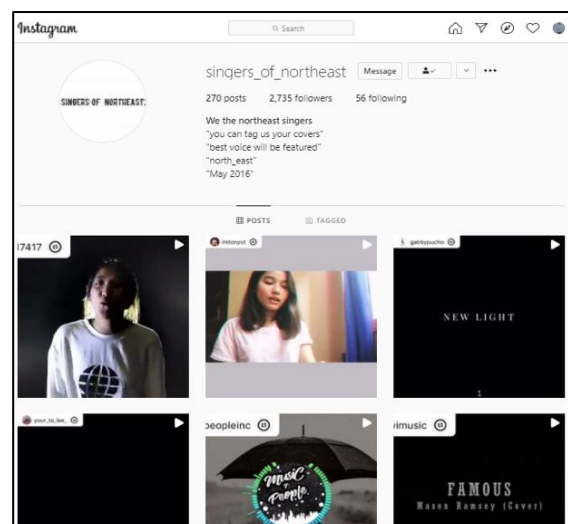
other scenic laden places are garlanded from this platform.



Source: https://www.instagram.com/beauty_of_arunachal/

f. singers_of_northeast

Music is one of the artefacts associated with cultural production process. North-East for its cultural vibrancy is also known for inexplicable love for the music. This handle has about 2,735 followers and they claim that best voice will get featured. However, the handle highlights them as the singers_of_northeast. Most of the feeds are audio or video clips and has deep influence of western music and the instruments.

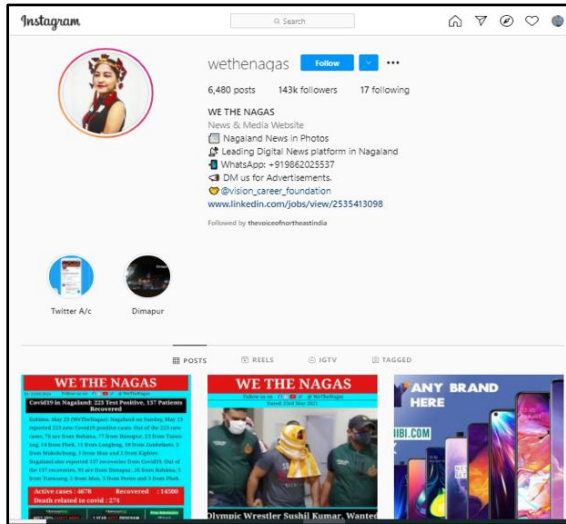


Source: https://www.instagram.com/singers_of_northeast/

g. wethenagas

This handle is one of the most popular Instagram handle from the region. It has large

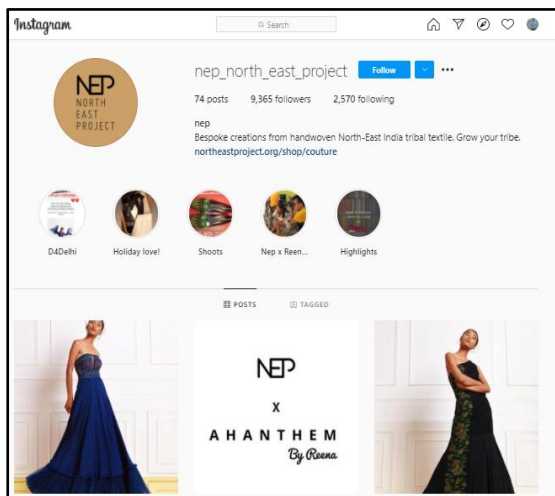
follower base of about 143k followers. The feeds are very regular in nature and it has about 6480 posts. It provides a perfect platform to Naga Community to platter their issues ranging from political, art and culture and civic engagement for national and global audiences.



Source: <https://www.instagram.com/wethenagas/>

h. nep_north_east_project

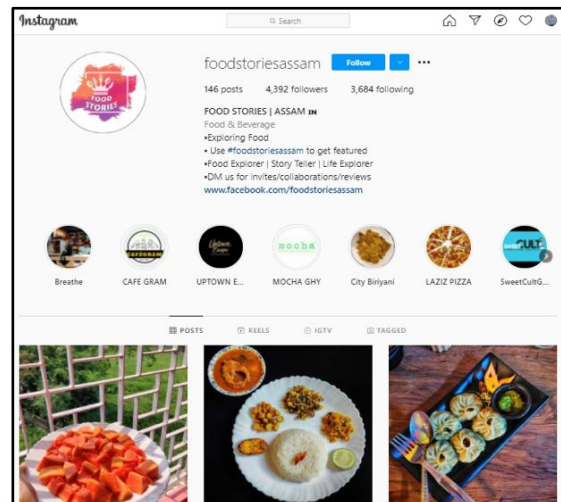
North East Project (nep) is an initiative for weavers from the region to showcase their artistic craftsmanship specifically related to the indigenous ethnic apparels. The apparels are associated with multiple tribal groups with a modern twist. This handle is followed by more than 9365 followers till 23/05/21. This platform has attained an important ground to address larger audiences across the nation and the globe.



Source: https://www.instagram.com/nep_north_east_project/

i. **foodstoriesassam** Instagram handle provides flavour full journey of North-East India's delicacy across social media users. It operates as an expression of cultural identity of people hailing from the region specifically revolving around their culinary choices. Apart from traditional food items from this region; this handle also showcases modern culinary choices popular across mass culture. To channelize its popularity among commercial pathways; this twitter handle has associated with popular food brands by endorsing their products in the platform. There are about 4,392 followers till 23/05/2021 and the number is mounting high.

The endorsement and publicity of commercial brands within its platform offers a significant observation that this hyper-local twitter handle is also acting as a popular platform for brand endorsement.



Source: <https://www.instagram.com/foodstoriesassam/>

CONCLUSION AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE ENGAGEMENT

The academic engagement offers an understanding of the changing and evolving spaces associated with 'Digital Culture' specifically within the corridors of Instagram that promotes the "culture of visibility". The digital culture with the intertwinement of visibility focuses on the production and reception of cultural artefacts in divergent forms. These forms are associated with the platform, which is not restrictive to any physical boundary.

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