

Instagram, Fashion and Culture: A Study on How Social Media Influences Style Choices Among College Students in Chennai.

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In this paper, we are going to analyse the impact of visual social media, Instagram in particular, on the fashion identity of the college students in Chennai. Chennai as a city, with its unique conservative tradition and urbanisation provides a specific fashion consumption landscape. This research investigates 50 public Instagram posts using hashtags specific to Chennai by qualitative netnography method to find the disparity between the digital trend patterns around the world and the realities on campus. The results show a trend of Glocalized Remixing, in which students are adapting global trends like Y2K or Athleisure, to local modesty and weather demands. It also creates the concept of Digital Dualism, in which students have two sets of clothes, one set relating to their real-life campus presence, and the other to their online feed, and the Sneaker Equalizer as a device to reconcile the traditional and modern aesthetics. The study concludes that Instagram is not homogenizing the fashion of Chennai students but is more of a toolkit of cultural negotiation.

Keywords – Netnography, Globalized Remixing, Digital Dualism, Sneaker Equalizer

I. INTRODUCTION

The advent of social media has revolutionized the manner in which fashion is diffused into society. The way trends used to work was strictly top to bottom, originating only on elite runways and in high-end magazines, and then trickling down to mass-market retailers for the masses. "Today, with Instagram and street style culture, trends come straight from the everyday consumer to the fashion houses, with a fast, multi-directional flow. Digital networks flatten global visual culture, a student in Chennai is able to instantly access a style launched in New York or Paris.

But instant visibility doesn't automatically mean instant adoption, especially in culturally conservative environments. Chennai, which many see as the bastion of South Indian tradition, offers a different proposition for global fast fashion. Strict college dress codes prohibit round neck t-shirts, jeans or sleeveless tops. This spatial dynamic is an intense contrast between the hyper-modern identity students construct online and the controlled esthetic required on campus. In this paper I examine how students negotiate this cultural tension.

Specifically, how do Chennai students inscribe Instagram's visual lexicon into their daily, mediated reality?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to base this work, we rely on two classic sociological theories, and a recent context on Indian fashion.

2.1 The Presentation of Self (Goffman, 1959)

According to the dramaturgical theory by Erving Goffman, people act on a front stage in front of an audience and on a back stage in private it is different. Likewise in Instagram students express an idealized and trendy image, and in the back stage in the campus they act in a conforming way.

2.2 The Digital Age Extended Self (Belk, 2013)

Russell Belk revised his theory of the Extended Self to encompass digital possessions. To Gen Z, a dress on Instagram is not just a piece of clothing but a piece of digital content that earns a person social currency -likes/comments. It is the reason why students would spend money on the things that are Instagrammable instead of useful.

2.3 Glocalization (Gupta et al., 2023)

In Indian Fashion, the concept of glocalization is applicable. Recent research on the fashion among Indian youth indicates that Indian students do not passively absorb Western fashion. Rather, they practice Glocalization which involves modulation of world tendencies to national cultural preferences. This can be seen in the trend of Indo-Western fusion whereby one is allowed to express modernity in the traditional limits.

2.4 The 'Spotlight Effect' and Digital Narcissism (Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Dumas et al., 2017)

A study conducted by Dumas et al. (2017) indicates that Instagram is not similar to Facebook, as it is purely visual and performance-oriented. Their argument is that this forms a Spotlight Effect, as users feel that they are being watched more closely than what they are in reality. In the case of college students, this leads to the stress of never wearing the same clothes again. This is consistent with the results of Twenge and Campbell (2009) regarding the increase of narcissism in

Generation Z, where the main means of "branding" oneself to peers is personal style.

2.5 Visual Social Media and Body Surveillance (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015)

Fitspiration is a term that was coined by Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015). Their investigation discovered that viewing of this fitness inspiration images on Instagram results in an amplified body Surveillance, the tendency to continuously observe personal appearance. In the Chennai case, this literature can be used to understand the emergence of the Athleisure (yoga pants, gym wear) in campuses. Students are not simply wearing such clothes to be comfortable, but to indicate that they belong to the global economy of the so-called fitness lifestyle that is advertised by influencers.

2.6 Conspicuous Consumption in the Digital Age (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015)

Eckhardt and Bardhi (2015) have revised the vintage theory of conspicuous consumption into the digital era, where Veblen found buying expensive things to demonstrate status. According to them, to Gen Z, status is no longer the possession of luxury goods, but the opportunity to experience like travelling, visiting aesthetically-pleasing cafes. They confirm the observation that Chennai students value Instagrammable accessories such as particular sneakers or watches, rather than costly clothes since they are more prominent in the table-top food pictures and self-portraits.

2.7 Sartorial Gap in Indian Youth (Khare et al., 2012)

An analysis of youth fashion among young people in India by Khare et al (2012) witnesses the existence of the Sartorial Gap between the metropolitan aspirations and the conventional family requirements. They discovered that Indian students tend to use Indian-Western fusion not only as a fashion, but also as a form of compromise approach to satisfy conservative parents and still be modern. This clearly contributes to the fact that Chennai students mix Kurtis with Jeans or Sneakers to maneuver between the two worlds.

2.8 Algorithm-Driven Homogenization (Chae, 2018)

Chae (2018) believes that social media algorithms form Echo Chambers of taste. When a student is exposed to K-Pop materials, the algorithm shows them with more Korean fashion, and subgroups homogenize their fashion. This is described in the literature as to why certain tribes of fashion like the group of the Korean Aesthetic seem to look so different and homogenous in Chennai colleges, also they are being given different algorithmic diets.

III. METHODOLOGY

This paper applies the Netnography or Internet Ethnography, a qualitative research approach to study online cultures.

Netnography:

Netnography is ethnography that has been modified to suit the intricacies of our modern computer-mediated social world and was developed by Robert Kozinets in the late 1990s.

- **Source of the data:** Public Instagram posts.
- **Total Samples :** 50 posts
- **Selection criteria:** Posts should contain hashtags of the demographic (e.g., #ChennaiFashion, #Loyola, #SRM, #NIFT, #OOTDChennai), and should be made within the current academic year (2024-2025).
- **Analysis Method:** Visual Content Analysis was used to classify outfits into Global Trends, Campus

SAMPLE POSTS

ID	Location/ College	Visual Description (Outfit & Accessories)	Category	Trend Note
01	Loyola College	White linen shirt (rolled sleeves), grey formal trousers, Apple Watch Ultra , black loafers.	[CC]	The "Old Money" aesthetic adapted for strict dress codes.
02	Nungambakkam	Pastel green Chikankari Kurti, white leggings, Nike Air Jordan 1s (Panda) .	[FUS]	The "Sneaker Equalizer" – trendy footwear with ethnic wear.
03	SRM IST (Ktr)	Blue formal shirt, black pants, ID card visible. Focus on groomed beard & Ray-Ban aviators .	[CC]	"Top-Half Bias" – accessories compensate for uniform.
04	Bessy Beach	Oversized graphic tee (Anime print), cargo shorts , flip-flops.	[WR]	The "Weekend Switch" – strictly off-campus wear.
05	Phoenix Marketcity	Beige corset top layered over a white crisp shirt, baggy denim jeans.	[FUS]	Layering used to make a "risqué" trend modest enough for family.
06	Anna Nagar	Floral midi dress with puff sleeves. Silver oxidized heavy jhumkas.	[FUS]	"Cottage-core" meets Chennai tradition.
07	Stella Maris	Kanjeevaram Silk Saree, sleeveless blouse, Fitbit on wrist, Converse high-tops.	[FUS]	Practical comfort mixed with high tradition.
08	VIT Chennai	Grey hoodie (University logo), black track pants, messy bun.	[ATH]	Exam season "Comfort Core."
09	Amethyst Cafe	Close-up of coffee cup & hand. Wearing heavy silver rings on every finger.	[CC]	Accessory-focused content (outfit hidden).
10	T-Nagar	Simple cotton kurta but carrying a premium tote bag (Michael Kors) .	[FUS]	"High-Low" mix – Street clothes + Luxury bag.
11	Express Avenue	Ripped skinny jeans, black crop top, flannel shirt tied around waist.	[WR]	Flannel acts as a "modesty shield" if needed.
12	NIFT Chennai	Hand-painted denim jacket, oversized men's white shirt worn as a dress, combat boots.	[WR]	"Avant-Garde" – NIFT students as outliers.
13	Besant Nagar	Neon cycling shorts, oversized t-shirt, headphones around neck.	[ATH]	The "Gym-Fluencer" aesthetic.
14	Loyola (Viscom)	All-black outfit: Black Kurta, black jeans, white sneakers.	[FUS]	"Monochrome" trend applied to ethnic wear.

ID	Location/ College	Visual Description (Outfit & Accessories)	Category	Trend Note	ID	Location/ College	Visual Description (Outfit & Accessories)	Category	Trend Note
15	OMR Food Street	College hoodie worn over a tank top.	[WR]	"Hidden Rebel" – layering for transition from class to hangout.		Beach	top.		signaling.
16	Sathyam Cinemas	White silk veshti and shirt, sunglasses inside the theater.	[CC]	"Mass" culture fashion – celebrating local tradition.	39	MOP Vaishnav	Group photo. Identical "Department T-shirts" with jeans.	[CC]	The "Uniform" of college fests.
17	KnK Road	Baggy "Parachute" pants, tight baby-tee (Y2K style).	[WR]	Direct adoption of global Y2K trends.	40	Home	Thrifty men's shirt cropped into a top (DIY).	[WR]	DIY/Thrift flip trend.
18	Home (Mirror)	Saree draped over jeans (Dhoti style).	[FUS]	Content created <i>only</i> for Instagram (not worn out).	41	Egmore Museum	Brown trousers, cream shirt, tote bag.	[CC]	"Light Academia" / Pinterest inspired.
19	SRM IST (Labs)	White lab coat over a formal salwar suit. Heavy winged eyeliner.	[CC]	Makeup as the primary expression tool.	42	Auto Rickshaw	Raincoat over salwar, plastic chappals.	[CC]	Reality of monsoon (Function > Fashion).
20	Mylapore Temple	Cotton saree, jasmine flowers (Mallipoo) in hair, smart watch.	[CC]	"Trad-Wife" aesthetic trending on Reels.	43	Palazzo Cinemas	All pink outfit (Pink Kurti + Pink Dupatta).	[FUS]	"Barbiecore" trend adapted to ethnic wear.
21	Chamiers Cafe	Linen co-ord set (shirt and shorts).	[WR]	The "Resort Wear" look in the city.	44	WCC (Chapel)	Modest white Salwar Kameez.	[CC]	Context-specific modesty.
22	College Bus	Face covered with scarf, headphones on.	[CC]	"Transit Fashion" – function over form.	45	Gym	Under Armour / Nike logos clearly visible.	[ATH]	Brand consciousness.
23	H&M Trial Room	Mirror selfie wearing a sequin party dress.	[WR]	"Trial Room Content" – wearing it for the photo, not buying.	46	Radio Room	Black shirt, silver chain, hair gelled back.	[WR]	"Clubbing" aesthetic.
24	Anna Univ (CEG)	Indigo block print kurta, silver nose pin, Kolhapuri chappals.	[CC]	The "Intellectual/Artsy" campus look.	47	Terrace (Sunset)	Back shot of Saree, backless blouse.	[WR]	Risqué fashion for controlled environments.
25	Bessy Skating Rink	Baggy cargo pants, oversized tee, beanie (despite heat).	[ATH]	Skater subculture influence.	48	Anna Nagar	Baggy jeans, cropped cardigan.	[WR]	K-Pop fashion influence.
26	ECR Drive	Floral shirt (unbuttoned over t-shirt), wind-blown hair.	[WR]	"Vacation Mode" aesthetic.	49	Canteen	ID card on table. Kurta with sleeves rolled up.	[CC]	Casual campus reality.
27	Starbucks	Blazer worn over a graphic t-shirt. Laptop open.	[FUS]	"Start-up Bro" / Hustle culture aesthetic.	50	Airport	Matching Co-ord sweatsuit, neck pillow.	[ATH]	"Airport Look" copied from influencers.
28	Chennai Metro	Backpack worn on front. Kurti tucked into jeans.	[FUS]	Practical commuter fashion.	Summary of Distribution: [CC] Campus Compliant (34%) Regular, rule following clothes are students' top choice to wear on campus. [FUS] Fusion (28%) Students enjoy mixing traditional Indian pieces with modern Western clothes. [WR] Weekend Rebel (26%) Students save bolder, trendier Western clothes for free time outside of campus hours. [ATH] Athleisure (12%) Students' least common style choice is comfortable, sporty everyday clothing.				
29	NIFT Campus	Dress made of upcycled saree fabrics.	[FUS]	Sustainability / Upcycling trend.					
30	Apartment Lift	Gym leggings and sports bra.	[ATH]	Private space selfie.					
31	Loyola	Formal shirt tucked in, sleeves rolled exactly to elbow, expensive belt.	[CC]	"Professional" signaling.					
32	Sowcarpet	Bandana on head, sunglasses, loose t-shirt.	[WR]	"Street" look for chaotic environments.					
33	SRM Hostel	Shorts and vest (Banyan).	[CC]	The "Backstage" reality (rarely posted).					
34	VR Mall	Bomber jacket, jeans, chunky sneakers.	[WR]	Westernized leisure wear.					
35	Wedding Hall	Silk Saree, heavy gold jewelry, hair in loose waves (not braid).	[FUS]	Modern hair styling with traditional clothing.					
36	Anna Centenary Lib	Glasses, messy bun, oversized sweater.	[CC]	"Dark Academia" aesthetic attempts.					
37	KnK Road	Focus on manicured nails (Nail Art) holding a drink.	[CC]	"Manicured" aesthetic.					
38	Marina	Yoga pants, loose tank	[ATH]	Wellness/Fitness					

Summary of Distribution:

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- [WR]** Weekend Rebel (26%) Students save bolder, trendier Western clothes for free time outside of campus hours.
- [ATH]** Athleisure (12%) Students' least common style choice is comfortable, sporty everyday clothing.

IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Qualitative visual analysis of the netnography of the 50 sampled posts revealed complex layers of negotiation between global digital trends and hyper-local constraints. The data indicate that the Chennai students are not passive consumers of fashion but active remixers of culture. The findings are presented in six themes.

4.1 The Chennai Remix: Localising Trends

However, contrary to the notion that social media is homogenizing culture, this study reveals a high degree of customization of international micro-trends prior to their adoption by the Chennai student population. This is a remixing process called "Glocalised Remixing," and it involves un-filtering tendencies in two main prisms: Modesty (cultural/institutional conformability) and Climate (tropical aptness).

Observations:

- The most popular hashtag of the sample was the “Coquette Aesthetic” (popularized worldwide by lace mini-skirts, corsets, and ballet flats). But aesthetically, the trend was changed a lot. Instead of mini-skirts, subjects wore pastel pinks and whites with cotton maxi skirts or wide-leg palazzo pants. Likewise, the “Old Money” style with heavy blazers and sweaters, morphed into linen co-ord sets and cotton shirts thrown over the shoulders to avoid the heavy layering that would not work in the humid Chennai climate.

Analysis:

This shows a high level of fashion intelligence. This means deconstructing a trend to its core visual elements like colour palette, texture, and accessories and re-creating them with locally acceptable fabrics. In so doing they participate in the global digital conversation without the experience of the potential social conflict and bodily discomfort. The 'remix' will help them communicate fashion awareness to their online peers but be culturally appropriate offline.

4.2 Digital Dualism:

- In the Digital Dualism chapter the author analyzes the problem of digital dualism, focusing on its performative division.
- The findings show a visual and spatial separation of the content posted during academic (Monday to Friday) and leisure (Saturday to Sunday) time. This is called here Digital Dualism. The visible presence on campus is a play of conformity, while the digital feed is a carefully curated archive of the true self.

Observations:

- The Weekday Feed: Most of the posts tagged with college locations (eg. #Loyola, #SRM) were filled with Campus Compliant [CC] attire: solid color kurtas, collared formal shirts and visible identification cards. The body language of these pictures was either in groups or stiff.
- The Weekend Feed: When posting under a name that identified them as being in a third space, say when they were in a cafe in Nungambakkam or a beach in Besant Nagar on a weekend, the user wore “Weekend Rebel” [WR] clothes: torn denim, oversized street wear, crop tops, and backless dresses.

Analysis:

The fashion of chennai students is segmented in the dichotomy that the Campus Wardrobe is not the same as the Instagram Wardrobe. This dualism has a psychological function: students could comply with strict institutional rules without internalizing them. Posting the Rebel outfit on Instagram is a re-assertion of agency, a declaration to the world that the Kurta I put on to go to classes is not who I am; this is who I am.

4.3 The "Sneaker Equalizer":

Universities have rigorous rules on sleeve length, necklines, fit and other details for clothing, but there are few or no rules concerning shoes. Here is where the expression loophole comes in.

Observations:

Interestingly, 60 percent of posts featuring ethnic clothing such as Salwar Kameez or Kurtis were accompanied by chunky branded sneakers such as Nike Air Jordans, New Balance 550s or Adidas Yeezys. This combination was ubiquitous in both “Campus Compliant” and “Fusion” classes.

Analysis: The Sneaker Equalizer effect plays three important roles:

- 1. Status Signaling:** A pair of ₹15,000 sneakers are a status signal in a homogenous environment, that is, one with little clothing differentiation.
- 2. Modernity Bridge:** Students will bridge the gap between their traditional identity and digital identity by wearing conservative ethnic clothing with hyper-modern and western streetwear shoes. It helps the ethnic outfit not to seem old-fashioned.
- 3. Practicality:** Sneakers are also practical and useful since Chennai campuses are big compared to traditional footwear like chappals or heels which is just added motivation.

4.4 The Bias of the “Top-Half” & the Cafe Aesthetic

The very way the photographs were framed influenced the clothes people wore. Much of the data consisted of Table-Up photography shots that were taken when sitting in cafes or restaurants. This constraint has changed the consumption behaviour to the upper part of the body.

Observations:

- 1. Accessory Overload:** Accessories were piled up. Statement earrings in oxidized silver, resin loops and expensive glasses, even at home.
- 2. Grooming Focus:** Too much attention was paid to hair styling for highlights, complex braids and facial grooming with bearded looks among men, clean girl makeup among women.
- 3. The Invisible Bottom:** The bottom half of the outfit (trousers/shoes) was completely covered by the table in several posts on the Cafe Aesthetic.

Thesis: This is like the Zoom Shirt effect that came up in the pandemic but it's been adapted to the social media age. “The Instagrammable moment is usually when you are sitting at a table,” she said. “Students do not spend a lot of money in trousers or skirts but a lot of money in accessories and grooming.” This is known as the framing effect. The consumption of fashion is driven not just by what looks good in the mirror, but more so by what fits in the 4:5 aspect ratio of a social media post on Instagram.

4.5 The Emergence of Athlete-style Consciousness in Brands.

Although purely western fashion is limited, a certain niche is being created by Athleisure (sportswear as casual wear),

particularly driven by the growth of fitness influencer and Gym-Tok culture.

Observations:

The posts categorized under [ATH] (Athleisure) were almost entirely dominated by brand logos. Unlike simple kurtas or second hand jeans, the posts in the gym wear category carried heavily branded logos of companies like Under Armour, Nike or Puma.

Analysis:

This means health and fitness will become a new kind of social capital. Wearing branded active wear is a sign of a distinctive lifestyle – disciplined, health-conscious and globally connected – that is highly valued in the digital marketplace. High-end active wear is another path of high status display to Chennai students, who are often limited in their choices of party wear.

4.6 The Rebellion of the Underground: Rebellion of accessories.

Students also wear micro-accessories in lieu of sneakers, a quiet way to subvert strict dress codes that may not be noticed by administration but are highly noticed by students on the Internet.

Observations:

The Campus Compliant posts provided an analysis of non-traditional accessories used with formal clothes: smart watches with neon bands, ear piercing, visible tattoos on the wrists/forearms, painted nails.

Analysis:

This is what we call “micro-resistance.” It is the requirement to wear a formal shirt in the college. The student has no power in this requirement but can still show their individuality by a visible tattoo or a brightly colored watch strap. These minor signifiers can be interpreted as coded signals to their peers, showing that although the uniform, the person has fallen into the realms of the modern and liberal aesthetics.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Statistics reveal that the students of Chennai are not victims of homogenization of the West but negotiators of culture.

1. Negotiation, not Assimilation: Chennai students bricolage (local fabrics like linen/cotton and global silhouettes) to survive the heat and the rules, unlike the students in the more liberal cities who may embrace trends wholesale.

2. Third Space of Fashion: Instagram has become a third space between college and home. It is the only platform where students can get full appreciation for their fashion identity without the judgment of conservative relatives or college officials.

3. Economic Implications: The discovery of the Sneaker Equalizer would possibly imply that the shift of student spending away from apparel which is regulated and toward accessories and footwear, unregulated is happening, which is an important indicator for marketers to consider.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This qualitative netnographic study (N=50) challenges the simplistic explanation of the homogenisation of fashion choices by Indian youth through social media. Instead, it highlights a multidimensional ecosystem of negotiation, adaptation and strategic performance among college students in Chennai.

The results indicate three concrete changes in the student consumer behaviour:

1. Imitation to Remixing: Chennai students do not parrot world trends. They remix Western fashion in a globalized way, taking Western fashions such as the coquette or old Money style and re-creating it in culturally and climatically correct materials, linen cotton kurtis. This confirms that local culture is not only a passive receiver but also a potent filter of global digital trends.

2. The Fracture of Identity (Digital Dualism): The paper affirms that rigid institutional dress codes have not stifled contemporary fashion expression but pushed it aside. Students are now having a sort of Dual Wardrobe; one submissive Uniform at the physical campus, and a subversive Aesthetic at the online feed. Instagram has successfully turned into the Real World in which their authentic identity is acted upon, and the college campus has become a secondary, performative stage.

3. The Sneaker Economy: With clothing being still strictly controlled by conservative standards, shoes have become the biggest means by which status signals are carried. The Sneaker Equalizer phenomenon shows that students are redistributing their financial assets in uncontrolled areas (shoes, accessories, grooming) to cover the discrepancy between their conservative clothes and their new goals.

Broader Implication:

This research will imply to fashion theorists and marketers that the Westernization of the Indian youth is a myth. What we are seeing is Modernization, it has Indian Characteristics. The future of youth fashion in cities such as Chennai is not to substitute the Kurta with the Crop Top but to style the Kurta with the Jordans, a blend which does not deny the past but makes the future.

VII. CONSTRAINTS AND SCOPE

7.1 Limitations:

- **Sample Bias:** The use of public accounts, created biased data towards more outgoing and due to which the trendy students and silent observers were not analyzed.
- **Platform Specificity:** The study was limited to Instagram. Tendencies on new platforms like Snapchat, Pinterest can vary.
- **Visual-Only Analysis:** Since it is a netnographic study, the analysis is founded on visual interpretation of photos. It does not have the depth of "Why" those

face-to-face interviews might offer as to internal psychological motives.

7.2 Future Scope:

- **Quantitative Validation:** Future researchers might confirm such qualitative data by a survey with N=500, to obtain the quantitative data on the monthly spending on Instagram-specific purchases and Campus-specific essentials.
- **Gender Comparison:** As a comparative study, it could be studied whether male students experience similar level of "Digital Dualism" as female students since the dress codes of males are not as restrictive in Chennai colleges.
- **The Economy of Thrift:** A focused research study on the emergence of Instagram Thrift Stores within the Chennai market would further explore the sustainability factor relating to student fashion.

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