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Perera BY, Chaudhury SR, **Albinsson PA**, Nafees L. This Is Who I Am: Instagram as Counterspace for Shared Gendered Ethnic Identity Expressions. *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*. 2021;6(2):274-285. doi:10.1086/713288. Publisher version of record available at: <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.1086/713288>

This Is Who I Am: Instagram as Counterspace for Shared Gendered Ethnic Identity Expressions

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ABSTRACT Dominant media stereotypes, oppression, and cultural expectations within diasporic communities exert pressure on Western women of South Asian descent. This research examines the way these individuals use Instagram as a counterspace to create and share gendered ethnic identity (GEI) expressions to counter oppression and promote well-being. In doing so, this study answers the call to advance research on genders, markets, and culture by exploring GEI as a sociocultural, intersectional construct. Based on visual data analysis and the extant literature, we posit a framework of social media as a counterspace for shared GEI expressions. This framework introduces three novel challenging processes (acts of intragroup questioning, acts of intragroup alliance, and narratives of possibility) that participants use to foster just representation and collective well-being.

This research examines identity expressions of Western women of South Asian (SA) descent (WWoSAD) on the Instagram site @browngirlgang, in response to the oppression they experience in society including from mainstream media and their ethnic groups. Sexist, antifeminist, and misogynistic media portrayals such as that of Hillary Clinton as “monstrous and/or cyborgian, collapsing the boundaries between male and female, human and animal, and organism and machine” during the 2007–8 US Democratic primary campaign are an ongoing issue (Ritchie 2013, 102). More recently, 61% of the coverage of Kamala Harris, a woman of Indian and Jamaican descent, as the 2020 Democratic vice-presidential candidate, focused on her race and gender relative to 5% for the 2016 male nominees (Morin 2020). Moreover, 25% of this content described Harris using racist and sexist stereotypes (Morin 2020). Such examples provide a glimpse into how women’s gender and intersectional identities affect their lived experiences. In terms of SA ethnic community-based oppression, gender discriminatory practices, some of which begin even before a child is born, sustain patriarchal values and social norms (see <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/what-we-do/gender-equality>). Within

this milieu, women are generally expected to defer to male authority (Shah 2016). Despite migration to Western countries, some of these gender role expectations still prevail within some SA communities.

Gender is socially constructed and “imbued with symbolic acts” (Zayer et al. 2012, 335); therefore, the experiences and identity development processes of WWoSAD are likely different from those of their parents (Rajiva 2009), as values and cultural factors influence socialization (Talbani and Hasanali 2000). Thus, in terms of gender role expectations, these women negotiate two cultures—the one of their ethnic heritage and the Western one into which they are born (Lindridge, Hogg, and Shah 2004; Rajiva 2009). Additionally, for many Americans the term “Asian” connotes those of East Asian descent (Makalintal 2019). Consequently, those of SA descent are either stripped of their cultural heritage by being viewed as part of another group (e.g., African American, Latinx) and/or are stereotyped based on media-driven characterizations. Given these dominant societal narratives, internalized oppression that occurs within minority communities (Trieu and Lee 2018) likely affect WWoSAD’s lived experiences. Media depictions influence consumers’

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JACR, volume 6, number 2. Published online March 22, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1086/713288>

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perceptions of others, and in the US, representation of minoritized groups leaves much to be desired (Zayer et al. 2012; Tincknell 2020).

SA Americans are one of the fastest growing immigrant groups in the US. In 2015, this demographic comprised 4.9 million individuals, 80% of whom are of Indian descent (Bhattacharjee 2018). Despite the rising prominence of female celebrities of SA heritage (e.g., Mindy Kaling, *The Office*; Lilly Singh, *A Little Late with Lilly Singh*; MIA, singer), SA representations are tinged with stereotypes (Tincknell 2020). Although Asians in general are stereotyped as the model minority, their positive qualities (e.g., hardworking, mathematically and technologically skilled, socioeconomically successful) are often mocked as caricatures (Harpalani 2013; Skop 2017). While *Never Have I Ever*, a 2020 Netflix series that features a female Indian American teenage protagonist, addresses the lack of representation, it still accentuates stereotypes (e.g., an overprotective mother, a patriarchal uncle, a heavily accented and highly educated cousin torn between her boyfriend and an arranged marriage, and the ever-ubiquitous interfering “aunties”). Research also indicates that SA American women are perceived as being “weak, passive, submissive, exotic, and subservient,” and, in terms of sexuality, they are either “asexual and undesirable” or “hypersexual, Kama Sutra proficient, and sexually available” (Patel 2007, 53). African American women also face such race-, sex-, and class-based stereotypes (McKay and Johnson 2008; Litchfield et al. 2018), which is further indicative of the prevalence of oppressive media content directed at racially minoritized women.

As such, oppression, which is interwoven into the fabric of daily life in the norms and assumptions that underpin institutions and interactions (Young 2011), perpetuates societal stereotypes and adversely affects the lived experiences of those impacted. Extant research identifies counterspaces as settings where those experiencing societal oppression and discrimination seek camaraderie and validate one another’s experiences to promote well-being (e.g., Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000). Case and Hunter (2012) posit that counter-space participants use multiple challenging processes for self-protection and self-enhancement. Besides limited examination of counterspaces from an intersectional perspective at gatherings such as Michfest, a female-oriented music festival (McConnell et al. 2016), much extant work focuses on higher education settings with Black student populations (e.g., Case and Hunter 2014). Recently, in their study of the “I, Too, Am” movement, George Mwangi, Bettencourt, and Malaney (2018) examined how minoritized university

students utilized online platforms (i.e., Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter,) to counter institutional racism by raising awareness of microaggressions and developing a community to “affirm and validate their racial identity and racialized experiences” (146). In doing so, they posited that counterspaces may also be created and maintained online (George Mwangi et al. 2018) as a space for responding to oppression and bias (Bonilla and Rose 2015). However, despite increasing digital virtual consumption (DVC; Drenten and Zayer 2018), there is a dearth of gender and consumer research addressing counterspaces in the virtual domain, specifically social media (hereafter SM) platforms. This study aims to address these gaps by gaining a deeper understanding of the way in which WWoSAD use Instagram, a form of DVC (Molesworth and Denegri Knott 2013; Drenten and Zayer 2018), to create and share gendered ethnic identity (GEI) expressions. In doing so, we present a framework of Instagram as a counter-space setting where challenging processes are utilized for GEI expressions to promote well-being. Our research responds to calls for intersectional research on consumers’ lived experiences (e.g., Crocket et al. 2011; Gopaldas and Fischer 2012; Gopaldas 2013). We contribute to the literature in multiple ways. First, we introduce counterspaces from critical race and gender studies (CRGS) into gender, markets, and culture literatures. This is important because as counterspaces facilitate consumers convening with others of their particular intersectional identities for community building and support, they offer consumer researchers and practitioners insights into underrepresented (e.g., gender, race, ableness, age) consumers’ lived experiences and what must be addressed to create just and fair marketplaces and consumptionscapes. Second, we examine the way a visual SM platform is utilized as a virtual counterspace to address societal misrepresentation and both intragroup and external gender oppression. Finally, we extend Case and Hunter’s (2012) conceptual framework by introducing three novel challenging processes.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

We first review GEI literature to emphasize the importance of intersectional research in gender studies. Intersectionality is the interplay between an individual’s various social identity structures (e.g., gender, race, class, sexual orientation), which fosters lived experiences (Gopaldas 2013). Intersectionality is complex; in examining Black women’s experiences, Crenshaw (1989, 140) notes that “the intersectional experience . . . is greater than the sum of racism and sexism.”

Using an intersectional approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how race and gender, which are two inextricable constructs, affect the lived experiences of women of color. To examine the intersectionality of race and gender identities, we utilize the conceptual framework of counterspaces (Solorzano et al. 2000; Case and Hunter 2012) from CRGS. Finally, we offer a brief overview of SM as a democratic space, which allows for the formation of counterspaces.

Gendered Ethnic Identity (GEI)

Identity comprises an individualized component (e.g., physical and intellectual traits) and a social component stemming from one's roles (e.g., parent, daughter, manager, employee) and group memberships (e.g., gender, ethnicity, race, class) (Thoits and Virshup 1997; Oyserman, Smith, and Elmore 2014). Identity is fashioned in part by recognition, its lack thereof, or misrecognition by others (Taylor 1994). Social identity entails identifying oneself "with a group as a whole, using broad social categories to describe 'who we are'" (Thoits and Virshup 1997, 106). An individual has multiple hierarchical identities (Serpe and Stryker 1987; Pasupathi, Wainryb, and Twali 2012), which are dynamic, influenced by context, and provide a meaning-making lens through which to view the world (Ye and Robertson 2012; Oyserman, et al. 2014).

Gender identity includes gender psychological traits, social gender roles, and gender orientations (Palan 2001; Ye and Robertson 2012). Gender, "a basic cognitive construct, cultural category and political concept that intersects with the entire realm of consumer behavior" (Schroeder 2003, 1), is produced and maintained through several intersecting relationships (McCall 1992). Hein et al. (2016, 224), in their transformative gender justice framework, address gender inequalities, including discrimination and oppression, "as they manifest symbolically/culturally, individually, and structurally." Gender injustice often intersects with other injustice such as race and ethnicity (DeJaeghere, Parkes, and Unterhalter 2013).

Ethnic identity, in turn, stems from "awareness and knowledge of membership in an ethnic group, coupled with the emotions, behaviors, and values attached to ethnic group membership" (Lee 2005, 37). With respect to ethnic minority women, ethnicity and gender are identifying factors interlocking with one another (Cooky et al. 2010). Except for research on British men and women of SA heritage (e.g., Lindridge et al. 2004; Lindridge 2010; Dey et al. 2018), there is limited consumer research on how WWoSAD negotiate their lived experiences within various scapes (e.g., ethnoscapes,

mediascapes, consumptionscapes) from an intersectional perspective (Appadurai 1990).

Promoting Well-being through Counterspaces

Civilized oppression, a subtle form of oppression inherent in racism, sexism, and the like, belittles and disadvantages some groups on a systematic basis (Harvey 2015). Oppression is related to negative outcomes including demoralization, decreased self-esteem, internalized oppression, and lowered quality of life (Matthews and Adams 2009). Internalized oppression entails members of an oppressed group incorporating and accepting the prejudices that the dominant society has of them (Pheterson 1986). In terms of promoting the well-being of those oppressed, extant research discusses the role of the individual and the context (e.g., Brodsky et al. 2011), but there is limited research on the way context influences individuals' response to oppression (Case and Hunter 2012). A context is a setting, which is a system comprising "social processes (i.e., transactions between two or more groups of people), resources (i.e., human, economic, physical, temporal), and the organization of resources (i.e., how resources are arranged or allocated)" (Tseng and Seidman 2007, 219). Case and Hunter (2012, 261) define counterspaces as settings that "promote positive self-concepts among marginalized individuals . . . through the challenging of deficit-oriented dominant cultural narratives and representations concerning these individuals." Within counter-space settings, the marginalized engage in adaptive responding through multilevel strategies (e.g., confrontation, creating and maintaining of settings, social support) to minimize oppression and promote well-being (Case and Hunter 2012). In noting that the "exact amount and specific challenging processes is uncertain," Case and Hunter (2012, 262) conceptualize three processes that likely surface: *narrative identity work*, *acts of resistance*, and *direct relational transactions* (Case and Hunter 2012).

First, *narrative identity work* encompasses activities people undertake "to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept" (Snow and Anderson 1987, 1348). Narratives are stories occurring at individual, community, and societal levels (Rappaport 1995). Those within counterspaces use narratives of oppression, resistance, and reimagined personal narratives to challenge derogatory representations and foster healing (Opsal 2011; Case and Hunter 2012). Through oppression narratives, the marginalized develop "a shared and collectively-endorsed narrative" that reflects their realities (Case and Hunter 2012, 263). Resistance narratives

provide individuals with a vision of an oppression-free future, which kindles hope and optimism and thereby imparts a sense of “psychological resistance” that helps them counter negative dominant cultural narratives (Case and Hunter 2012; Kedzior and Allen 2016). Finally, through reimagined personal narratives, individuals develop “self-crafted and self-affirming identities” that are life-changing and freeing (Case and Hunter 2012, 265). In the second challenging process, *acts of resistance*, individuals criticize oppressive conditions and engage in identity-resonating cultural practices (e.g., rituals, language, dress) that may be devalued by society, without fear of rejection (Case and Hunter 2012). Finally, given that counterspaces are permeated by a sense of “fictive kinship,” which are founded on social, cultural, or economic bases (Carter 2007, 547), the third challenging process, *direct relational transactions*, refers to individuals routinely interacting, providing social support, and drawing upon “collective experiences and wisdom” to educate each other on strategies for responding to oppression (Case and Hunter 2012, 266).

Social Media (SM) as Democratic Mediated Space

SM, which meets consumers’ desire to join communities and socialize in mediated spaces (Enli and Thumim 2012), has given rise to new types of consumer behaviors (e.g., posting selfies, images, messages, and short videos). Much of the research on self-presentation and identity works on SM examines “selfie” practices (see Eagar and Dann 2016; Iqani and Schroeder 2016; Kedzior and Allen 2016) and self-presentation for marketing purposes (Schroeder 2013; Nargundkar, Nafees, and Kushal 2020). Kedzior and Allen’s (2016) research on posting selfies as a source of empowerment or an instrument of social control highlights the importance of SM as a setting. SM allows consumers to circumvent traditional media gatekeepers and participate in mediated public discourses, thereby establishing a “new terrain of democratization” (Chouliaraki 2010, 227). For example, Canadian Lilly Singh (a WWoSAD host of NBC’s late-night talk show) started her YouTube channel in 2010 partly because she did not see “characters on screen who looked like me or who I could identify with” (Singh 2020). However, although SM allows diverse voices, it continues “the reproduction and magnification of inequalities” omnipresent in traditional media by facilitating abusive behavior due to anonymity (Litchfield et al. 2018, 154). Jane (2020) notes the increasing pervasiveness of gendered violence and cyberhate directed at women that causes them significant harm. Despite such negativity, consumers are increasingly using SM to demand ethical

and socially responsible behaviors from fellow citizens, governments, corporations, and other institutions including the media (Perera et al. 2018). As discussing injustice and oppression can be controversial and/or uncomfortable (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Hein et al. 2016), SM allows consumers to voice their disagreement within their comfort zone (Senft and Noble 2013). Given limited representation and misrepresentation, like Singh, young SAs are bypassing said gatekeepers to create and share representative content (Dey et al. 2018; Shah 2019). By engaging in DVC and choosing to follow particular sociocultural constructs used in hashtags and account names (e.g., #browngirl), users avoid being “forced images of white, skinny celebrities in the mainstream media, individuals can present themselves in all their individual glory, and enjoy looking at other “normal” people” (Iqani and Schroeder 2016, 412). In the next section, we outline our research methodology.

METHOD

Instagram, with over one billion users in 2019, is one of the most popular SM platforms in the world. On this platform, multiple women rally under the “#browngirl” hashtag. While this term refers to a nonwhite female, it originates from women of Caribbean descent and is now embraced by women of many ethnicities including SAs (see app. A for a hashtag analysis and data trend for #browngirl usage; apps. A, B are available online). We use the Instagram account @browngirlgang, which was founded by an Australian WWoSAD, Sanjana Nagesh in 2017, as our context. Nagesh stated, “Before you had to rely on movies and television where women like us would be represented by one-dimensional characters and an amalgamation of clichés. Now we’re presenting our own narratives” (Shah 2019). According to SA heritage artist and author Maria Qamar, SA women are now combatting “ideas of dated tradition designed to keep us in line and keep us down” (Shah 2019). Nagesh, who describes the account as “A space to feature inspiring & badass South Asian women worldwide,” founded it to facilitate women of SA heritage assuming ownership of their identities. As of December 2020, @browngirlgang had over 730 posts and over 107,000 followers, an increase of over 50,000 followers in a year. The data set comprises 531 images spanning from March 2017 to November 2019, with posts averaging 15–20 per month. During this period, the posts remained unchanged, which allowed for a longitudinal approach to manual coding. As per Instagram policy, written permission was obtained from Nagesh to analyze images and text from the @browngirlgang account.

As is evident from the graphic image by @aestheticsbynuha (see fig. 1), Instagram is a visual platform; users see the image first, and text plays a secondary role. Intertextuality refers to how the meaning of a text (or image) is derived from not only the image itself but also the broader constructs from which society draws meaning (Hand 2017). We examine the images' "intertextual" dimensions, how they are socially constructed, and the way these complex interconnected meanings contribute to users' understanding of what is communicated. Inspired by Clifford Geertz, thick data entail descriptive analysis of cultural practices that involve emotions, stories, and meaning-making, often lost in the standardization of big data (Wang 2016). The thick data approach follows interpretive qualitative research tenets (Geertz 1973; Spiggle 1998) with a three-stage layering process of contextualization, description, and signification (Latzko-Toth, Bonneau, and Millette 2017; Ray Chaudhury, Nafees, and Perera 2020). During the coding process, each author independently wrote interpretive comments in the layering process. More specifically, in contextualization (first stage), each post was reviewed as a single unit to grasp its visual elements (e.g., body posture, close facial view, clothing). In description (second stage), authors independently wrote interpretive comments regarding the intersectionality of the various GEI dimensions. In this regard, the lived experiences of three of the authors who identify as WWoSAD informed the analysis. Finally, in signification (third stage), textual data in comments as well as use of hashtags, emojis, and likes further informed the analysis. At every stage, to assess intercoder agreement, authors discussed their understandings of the various categories until consensus was



Figure 1. Post from @browngirlgang (September 28, 2019) courtesy of @aestheticsbynuha.

reached. While the data demonstrate evidence of multiple theoretical perspectives, the extant framing in this study is situated within the consumer behavior (gender) and counterspace literatures (Spiggle 1998). For more detailed description of our methods, please see appendix B. We present three emergent themes in the findings section: *Challenging gender norms: Love me or hate me, this is who I am*; *Redefining gender norms: Together we stand*; and *Celebrating trailblazers and entrepreneurs*.

FINDINGS

In this section, using select examples from our data for illustrative purposes, we discuss the three emergent themes, which were enacted through the various challenging processes. In our analysis, we validate two of the challenging processes conceptualized by Case and Hunter (2012; narrative identity work and acts of resistance); however, direct relational transactions were not evident in our data. Additionally, we extend their work by introducing three previously unexplored challenging processes that arose from our analysis—acts of intragroup questioning, acts of intragroup alliance, and narratives of possibility. *Acts of intragroup questioning* entail individuals challenging their cultural group's gender norms and understandings; *acts of intragroup alliance* involve those within an intersectional identity community recognizing and supporting marginalized groups within said community; and *narratives of possibility* pertain to sharing aspirational intersectional identity expressions (see fig. 2 for representative images of the themes). Next, we indicate how these various processes are present in the emergent themes.

Challenging Gender Norms: Love Me or Hate Me, This Is Who I Am

In this theme, we discuss how WWoSAD address oppressive and unjust gender ideals. In contrast to the phrase "tall, dark, and handsome" defining masculinity across cultures, femininity has historically been emphasized through fairness. In SA communities, exacerbated by historical colonial ideals of female beauty, fair skin is also deemed "a standard of beauty and self-confidence that will lead to success and progress in life" (Hussein 2010, 411; Banks 2015). Over 40% of the posts reference the way mainstream media depicts dark skin tones, long dark hair, dark eyes, and curvy bodies as being nonnormative. In response to such internalized oppression (Trieu and Lee 2018), denoting lived experiences of not feeling beautiful or light-skinned enough, @browngirlgang posts imagery that celebrates the diversity of SAs' skin tones. Examples include graphic art images of

SAMPLE IMAGES

Theme 1	<p>Image 1 - November 16, 2019 OP featuring image by @zhkdesigns</p>  <p>Image 2 - July 9, 2017, OP</p> 	<p>Image 3 - July 12, 2018 Repost of OP by @allynaidoo</p> 	<p>Image 4 - August 27, 2017 OP featuring @sweatyswetha</p> 
	<p>Image 5 - January 29, 2019 OP featuring @nidhimohankamal</p> 	<p>Image 6 - May 4, 2018 OP featuring @miyalovesbeauty</p> 	<p>Image 7 - July 8, 2018 OP featuring @sudarsnak</p> 
Theme 2	<p>Image 8 - September 5, 2019 OP featuring @anjalicakra</p> 	<p>Image 9 - August 5, 2019 OP featuring @asianwomanfestival</p> 	<p>Image 10 - March 7, 2018 Repost via @kaurlife</p> 
	<p>Image 11 - October 3, 2019 OP featuring @desiboy.com.au</p> 	<p>Image 12 - June 11, 2018 OP featuring image by @mayamittal_</p> 	<p>Image 13 - June 24, 2019 OP featuring image via @aruna_anubhava x @queeringdesi</p> 
Theme 3	<p>Image 14 - January 3, 2019 OP featuring image via @refinery29</p> 	<p>Image 15 - October 12, 2019 OP featuring @reshmasaujani</p> 	<p>Image 16 - September 13, 2019 Repost of @femalefoundersfund</p> 
	<p>Image 17 - March 5, 2019 OP featuring @malihax_art</p> 	<p>Images 18 - December 3, 2018 OP featuring collaboration with @anumation</p> 	<p>Image 19 - November 30, 2018 OP featuring a tweet by Jameela Jamil featuring Disney Junior</p> 

Theme 1: Challenging Gender Norms: Love me or hate me, this is who I am. Theme 2: Redefining Gender Norms: Together we stand. Theme 3: Celebrating trailblazers and entrepreneurs. OP- original post.

Figure 2. Sample representative images in the themes from @browngirlgang.

women with various skin tones, and one featuring three raised female fists of various skin shades, showcasing solidarity for a positive change (see fig. 2, images 1, 2). Another post includes an image of a woman wearing traditional jewelry with white paint washing off her lower face and body to reveal her natural brown skin (fig. 2, image 3). On one level, this may be interpreted as WWoSAD challenging gender norms of women being pressured to lighten their skin, and on another, with the accompanying text, it also pertains to feeling comfortable sharing SA heritage and culture with others who are unfamiliar with it. On SM, hashtags help users find content, and, in over 60% of posts, @browngirlgang uses #unfairandlovely as an act of resistance to criticize oppressive ethnic community and marketplace practices. For example, Fair & Lovely, a skin-whitening cream, was one of Unilever's bestselling beauty products in the SA region for decades. From a more nuanced view, using the hashtag #unfairandlovely is *an act of intragroup questioning*, which entails WWoSAD disputing this gender-discriminatory beauty "standard."

Women's bodies and clothing are subject to scrutiny and policing (Awasthi 2017). In SA cultures, certain body types (muscular) and dress (tight or scant clothing) do not align with gender role expectations. Such norms are challenged through posts showing women with toned muscles in fitted performance wear (see fig. 2, images 4, 5). Other posts show women in Western and SA fusion wear embracing the duality of being WWoSAD (see fig. 2, images 6, 7). These arresting images demonstrate that WWoSAD engage in *acts of intragroup questioning* by challenging prescribed SA cultural norms. As dress constitutes a "social skin" (Turner 1993) that protects the body and communicates values, one's choice of clothing, and posting thereof, exhibits individual and collective identities (Hansen 2004). Beyond the SA community, such images address society on two fronts. First, SA garments (e.g., sari, dawani, salwar kameez) are atypical in Western mainstream societies so some, by likening them to performative costumes (Hansen 2004), may devalue them. Thus, wearing traditional clothes with pride is an identity-resonating cultural practice (Case and Hunter 2012) for WWoSAD. Second, these images counter stereotypes of SA women as being weak, passive, and submissive, thereby constituting acts of resistance.

Redefining Gender Norms: Together We Stand

This theme pertains to WWoSAD engaging with their own SA community to support and create a space for those that are traditionally marginalized within it. Eighteen percent

of the posts in the data set pertain to content related to this theme (e.g., supporting the nonheteronormative gender [LGBTQIA+] community). Besides conservative gender norms, SA cultures traditionally view homosexuality in a negative light (e.g., Jaspal 2012). One image, which shows two women in SA traditional wear kissing (see fig. 2, image 8), is accompanied by text from event planner/influencer @anjalichakra:

Dear young me, Don't be afraid to take up space and have a voice. Being a queer south Asian woman is your power, and you'll find a community around your identity. You'll see representation soon, but for now, be confident. Who you are is more than enough.

Another post of a female same-sex couple, dressed in a Western suit and a sari respectively, demonstrate their togetherness at a mainstream media event (see fig. 2, image 9). These women, lawyers Menaka Guruswamy and Arundati Katju, were instrumental in India decriminalizing homosexuality in 2018. Such visual depictions, which acknowledge a different intersectionality—SA+female+queer—and reference the gender spectrum, allude to the intragroup discrimination that exists within SA communities. In defiance of gender norms while at the same time offering empowerment, acceptance, and inspiration for LGBTQIA+ SAs, these images demonstrate what we posit as *acts of intragroup alliance*. As these posts primarily address those of SA heritage, they simultaneously impart pride in one's cultural roots and recognize nonheteronormative people within their communities. Though not directly addressing others' experiences, by referring to a better future, the quote shared above fosters hope and empowers the marginalized (Kedzior and Allen 2016). Thus, it may also be regarded as a resistance narrative of overcoming challenges, alluding to what can become reality (Case and Hunter 2012; Molesworth and Denegri-Knott 2013). Together, these posts illustrate how Instagram is a counterspace setting for representation of individuals with intersectional subordinate identities who may experience intersectional invisibility in society (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008). In a community spanning multiple continents, Instagram, as a counterspace, blurs boundaries and generates a sense of kinship based on users' SA heritage, reducing the feeling of being "an other" (Carter 2007; Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008; Case and Hunter 2012).

Additional *acts of intragroup alliance* within this theme feature posts of the older generation showing their support for others within the community. In one image with the text:

“Become the Aunty you wish to see in the world,” two older SA women carry the sign “Aunties against patriarchy” at an International Women’s Day rally (see fig. 2, image 10). As aunties are older (sometimes unrelated) SA females who “police” younger women’s abidance with cultural norms (Tincknell 2020), this visual simultaneously acknowledges and resists patriarchal structures. By playing on Mahatma Gandhi’s quote “Be the change you wish to see in the world,” it inspires community members to change their stance from “policing” the younger generation to being supportive of them. Though this distinction might seem nuanced, it is important because “aunties” are known in SA communities as having the potential to exert social pressure on those who do not quite fit or operate within general understandings of what is acceptable. For additional representative images of this theme, see figure 2, images 11–13.

Celebrating Trailblazers and Entrepreneurs

This theme, which includes shared content about women striving beyond intersectional subordinate identity limits prescribed by societal narratives, is important as one’s understanding of career possibilities is shaped by what is observed within one’s affiliative networks (Schau and Gilly 2003; Sealy and Singh 2008). Twenty-two percent of the posts include content related to inspiration/aspiration/new opportunities for women and 53% pertain to WWoSAD’s entrepreneurial and creative efforts. Exemplary posts feature female trailblazers and entrepreneurs of SA heritage. One post shows Dhivya Suryadevara, the chief financial officer of General Motors (see fig. 2, image 14), and another features Reshma Saujani, an Indian American lawyer, founder of Girls Who Code, and the first person of SA heritage to run for US Congress. Saujani’s open palms feature the words “Sisterhood” and “Brave, not perfect” (fig. 2, image 15). Women benefit from female role models because their accomplishments signal that gender barriers, which impede career progression, are surmountable (Lockwood 2006). In contrast to outdated traditions that situate the woman in the home, we posit that such *narratives of possibility* situate women in the corporate boardroom and beyond. Besides barrier-breaking trailblazers, @browngirlgang recognizes many noncelebrity WWoSAD within the virtual counterspace. For instance, a post of the CEO and founder of fintech app TalaMobile, Shiv Siroya, at what appears to be a panel discussion with a focused look on her face received many positive comments and likes (fig. 2, image 16). Given that only one in four tech start-ups have a female founder, Siroya’s noteworthy accomplishment is worthy of celebration. Yet an-

other post reinforcing the importance of representation and possibilities for WWoSAD shows a smiling female clad in a hijab and jean jacket in front of a vibrant mural of artist Frida Kahlo (see fig. 2, image 17). The accompanying text indicates that this artist and author, Maliha Abidi, has written a book about successful Pakistani women (*Pakistan for Women*). In keeping within this realm, several posts communicate the yearning for intersectional visibility through depictions of imagined SA versions of a superhero, and popular Western teen characters such as Lizzy McGuire and Kim Possible (fig. 2, image 18). In 2020, such *narratives of possibility* are becoming reality, with Disney introducing the SA character Mira Royal Detective (fig. 2, image 19). By displaying strong images and examples of what is possible for WWoSAD, @browngirlgang counters intersectional invisibility (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008; Case and Hunter 2012) through *narratives of possibility*.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Since the advent of visual mediated communication, images have played a powerful role in shaping perceptions regarding the role and place of women in consumer societies. The nonprofit seeJane.org, founded by actor Geena Davis to address gender inequalities in the media, regularly publishes reports on its pervasiveness in Western societies. Media portrayals have societal impact (e.g., Trieu and Lee 2018). Women therefore navigate multiple intersections of identity constructs in the face of oppressive power relations in society and media portrayals (hooks 2000), which can affect their well-being. This presents an opportunity for marketers to portray gender and its various intersectionalities in a more just manner (Hein et al. 2016).

This study on GEI expressions addresses the call for more intersectional research (Gopaldas 2013). As Crockett et al. (2011, 50) state, “Intersectionality’s core insight, which speaks directly to dynamics of agency and power, is that actors inhabit multiple identity, location, and power positions in a social system and that the relationships between these various positions are mutually constitutive and crosscutting, producing substantial complexity.” Through expressing their GEI on SM, consumers are acting on their agency; however, real-world biases still exist in this virtual space. For instance, women of color, despite being the majority worldwide, are often sidelined in virtual spaces. Given intersectional invisibility, and pressures arising from navigating multiple intersections, for the women in our study, GEI construction is ongoing yet empowering. As recognition is a “vital human need” (Taylor 1994, 26), virtual counterspaces

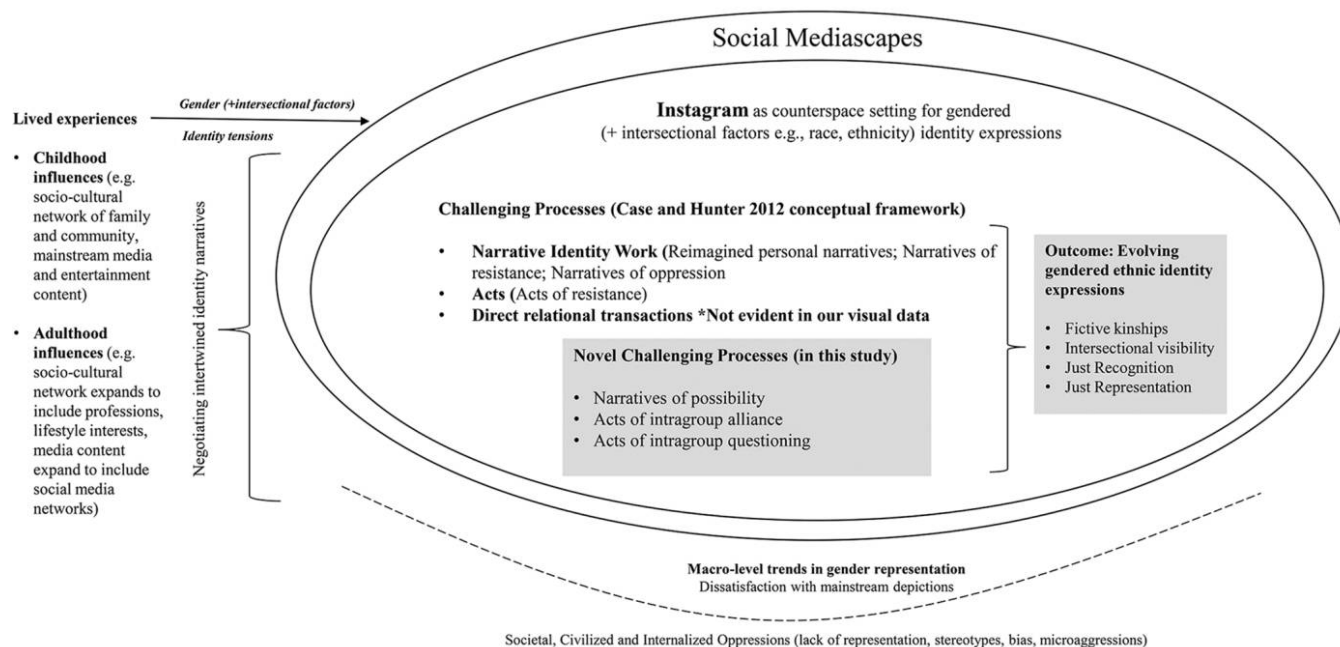


Figure 3. Instagram as counterspace setting for gendered ethnic identity expressions.

that facilitate the participation of widely dispersed individuals can help underrepresented groups heal from damage afflicted by society’s deficient representations (Taylor 1994; George Mwangi et al. 2018). Thus, SM-based counterspaces allow for communal co-construction of the self through imagery, comments, shares, and likes. In their study of the “I, Too, Am” movement, George Mwangi et al. (2018) noted the existence of direct relational transactions between individuals on Twitter and Facebook. As Instagram is primarily visual, we did not observe routine back-and-forth communication that is indicative of direct relational transactions. However, to some extent, due to a sense of kinship and camaraderie, one might argue that the site exhibits indirect relational transactions between users. As Belk (2013, 490) notes, “The self is much more actively managed, jointly constructed, interactive, openly disinhibited, confessional, multiply manifest, and influenced” by our online activities. The felt disinhibition some consumers experience when self-disclosing an aspect of one’s “true self” online can be liberating (Belk 2013; Kedzior and Allen 2016). As our findings show, being proud of who one is and challenging oppressive gender norms while standing up for other marginalized groups is self-enhancing (Case and Hunter 2012) and helps in establishing one’s GEI (Ye and Robertson 2012). In expressing respect for one’s roots and for oneself, women recognize their inherent value (Taylor 1994; Hein et al.

2016). This type of DVC is thereby transformative and functions as counterspace for collective “consumer identity narratives” (Crockett et al. 2011; Molesworth and Denegri Knott 2013; Drenten and Zayer 2018, 48).

Consumer research focusing on identity work has utilized posts of individuals’ everyday “real” selves and lives for multiple purposes including representation and support (Enli and Thumim 2012; Belk 2013; Gurrieri and Drenten 2019). WWoSAD are no different; they are collectively fostering well-being. Various Instagram communities’ use of #browngirl indicates a growing desire for representation, showing strength in the aggregate self (Belk 1988). For example, after Kamala Harris mentioned “chitthi,” the Indian Tamil/Thamizh word for “auntie,” in her nomination acceptance speech, the hashtag #kamalaauntie quickly surfaced on Instagram. Given Harris’s SA roots and the ever-ubiquitous aunties in SA cultures, with one word, Harris was able to inspire the formation of a political sisterhood, the “Chitthi Brigade” (Venugopal 2020).

Our research makes multiple contributions. First, we introduce the concept of counterspaces to the gender, markets, and culture literatures. Second, it examines the way in which marginalized women utilize SM to counter biased mainstream narratives about them, thereby promoting well-being. Finally, we extend Case and Hunter’s (2012) conceptual framework by introducing three new challenging

processes in our posited framework of Instagram as a counterspace (see fig. 3). As depicted in our framework, women experience identity tensions that inform their DVC in various ways. The central oval (Instagram is situated within SM) showcases the ways in which women utilize Instagram as a counterspace setting to voice and name their reality (Ladson-Billings 1998), thereby enhancing their well-being. Macro-level trends including societal, civilized, and internalized forms of gender oppressions, which are manifest in mainstream depictions (e.g., lack of representation, stereotypes, and biases), continue to be prevalent as indicated at the bottom of the figure. The intersectional aspects of WWoSAD identifying as empowered #browngirl(s) are central to their efforts in challenging gender and civilized oppression (Senft and Noble 2013; Bonilla and Rose 2015; George Mwangi et al. 2018). Dominant societal narratives are countered through challenging processes to empower individuals and prompt them to recognize the self and other marginalized groups (Taylor 1994; Hein et al. 2016; Kedzior and Allen 2016). The outcomes of these challenging processes (e.g., fictive kinship, intersectional visibility, just recognition, and just representation) influence evolving GEI expressions as depicted in the far right of the circle. By focusing on one SM site, our findings are limited in their generalizability, and we understand that we disregard the presence of “relationships formed between symbolic digital micro-activism and other online and offline engagement” (Dennis 2019, 55). Thus, while this article extends the theoretical purview on GEI expressions by demonstrating how Instagram can serve as a counterspace setting, there are opportunities for further research. For instance, exploring the synergy of consumer practices on global SM platforms and offline practices is worthy of research, as juxtaposing the two (online versus offline) by themselves is a “false binary” (Kedzior 2015, 277). Researchers can examine the posited outcomes in other contexts and through methods such as in-depth interviews / discourse analysis to better understand the impact on women’s outside (nonvirtual) lives (McConnell et al. 2016). Finally, given the need for more understanding of how consumers’ intersectional identities affect their lived experiences, we hope that future counterspace-based research in consumptionscapes will further contribute toward more just representation and recognition.

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