

Activists of themselves: liminality of Instagram and its role in the ethnic identity construction processes of third generation British Sikhs to their imagined identities

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Abstract

As a result of the rapid evolution of computer culture, social media and networking websites now provide the primary socialisation platforms for individuals across the world. With characteristics such as transcending time, space, and even cultures, these platforms impact individuals through increased interactions. Although past research shows how social media impacts on individuals' cultural affiliations and identity construction processes, research neglects to understand the role and impact of the characteristics of social media and networking environments as individuals engage in these virtual spaces. This paper uses Instagram as a case study, to demonstrate the liminal nature of social media spaces and looks at how this virtual space and its characteristics evoke a sense of reflexivity with regards to identity construction amongst young British Sikhs in the U.K. We highlight how the empowering characteristics of this virtual space impact their identity and just how the communities that are formed by individuals through Instagram, act as a further acculturative agent, as they attempt to deal with the tensions that they experience as a result of being both British and Sikh. Findings implicate how brands can engage with and support the individuals going through this reflective identity re/construction process.

Keywords: Instagram; Social media marketing, Imagined identities; Acculturation;

Liminal spaces; Identity construction

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1. Introduction

With the emergence of computer culture and social media (Dijck and Poell, 2013), social networking platforms have become an integral part of the modern consumers' lifestyles, as they engage in day-to-day interactions and socialisation processes online (Muhammad et al., 2017). In fact, for some consumers the extent of their day to day interaction and their social circle may revolve largely around virtual networking spaces (Dijck and Poell, 2013). Amongst these social networking platforms Instagram is one of the most popular, as it offers its users the ability to go beyond textual formats and visually share their daily lives through pictures and videos. Today, Instagram with its one billion monthly users (Clement, 2020a), is considered to be a global community in itself (Goworek et al., 2016). Expanding the span of interaction and increasing interconnectedness, social media liberalises interactions and paves the way for co-creative processes, between consumers and companies, and consumers and consumers from different backgrounds, ethnicities, genders and geographical and demographical credentials (Trepte and Masur, 2016), therefore creating a third culture that is beyond cultural boundaries (McEwan and Sobre-Denton, 2011). Indeed, recent scholarly work has shown that social media has moved consumers' experiences beyond the traditional boundaries of culture (Forbush and Foucault-Welles, 2016; Saha and Karpinski, 2016), to a *post-cultural* experience (Lizardo, 2011). However, given the differences in the ethnicities and cultural backgrounds among consumers of social media, the post-cultural experience is anticipated to have different effects for different consumers groups (Dey et al., 2017; Li and Tsai, 2015). Significantly, for ethnic

minorities, research argues that social media enables them to construct and reinforce multiple ethnicities online (Dey et al., 2018; Lindridge et al., 2015), leading them to develop multidimensional and multifaceted cultural orientations (Forbush and Foucault-Welles 2016).

Concurrently, an appealing side to social media use for consumers is that it transcends time and space (Kizgin et al., 2018a). Making locales irrelevant (Holloway and Vallentine, 2001), social media creates another space that is everywhere, but simultaneously nowhere and therefore described as “*third-placeness*” (Calderon, 2016). This third-placeness and in-between nature of social media, allows consumers to enjoy an extent of concealment of their identities, as such, social media offers them a blank slate or state to construct and negotiate everyday identities (e.g. Hu et al., 2017; Birnholtz et al., 2014; Van Dijck and Poell, 2013). Within the ambiguous and in-between realm of social media, individuals choose to forget elements of reality and change who they are or how they are seen in the eyes of the world, as we frequently see through Instagram accounts and selfies that are posted. As such, the in-betweenness that is consequential of the social media environment against the possibility of boundless identities, resembles what Van Gennep (1909) traditionally described as ‘liminal’ – a transitional cultural realm that is in-between and ambiguous, where individuals pass through this passage and are striped off their identities, resulting in different individuals or the capacity for a different identity to emerge.

The impact of social media on different cultural groups has been considered with an acculturation lens within the scholarly work (e.g., Kizgin et al., 2018b). Acculturation is a process of culture change involving learning all or parts of a new culture (Laroche and Jamal 2015) and social media can act as a tool of identity, ethnicity or nationality (Kizgin et al., 2020) facilitating ethnic minority consumers’ self-representations and presentations of identity (Kizgin et al., 2018b). In fact Kizgin et al., (2020) suggest that social media can be both anchoring and exacerbating for acculturation processes (Jamal et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2016).

Others have also looked at the use of social media, enabling remote acculturation (Ferguson et al., 2017), as a precursor to globalisation of consumer cultures (Bajde et al., 2019). Furthermore, as Dey et al., (2020) highlight, in digital realms, such as social media, individuals are empowered via increased access to information and knowledge (Cappelini and Yen, 2013) and this blurs the boundaries between online and offline identities. Along this vein, the placelessness of social media, and its liminal and transitional characteristics in reference to attaining empowerment and ethnic identity construction processes of cultural groups is a neglected but pertinent question. As liminality symbolises the transitional process between cultures, and the boundless possibilities of reconstructing the self and identity, partially mimicking the experience of ethnic minorities and immigrant groups in the host culture (Sheller and Urry, 2006). This issue is particularly significant with second and third generation ethnic minorities, as they are denoted as cultural navigators (Lindridge, Hogg and Shah, 2004), constantly reconciling their ethnic identities and creating their ethnic imaginaries. Indeed, scholars consider their ethnic diversity conflicts highly substantial with constant to-ing and fro-ing between the ethnic discourse of their subcultures and the cultural discourse of the host to which they are exposed in more enhanced capacity and freedom through social media (Groenewold and Valk, 2017). Hence, this paper aims to fill this gap by investigating the role of the liminal realm of social media and its effects over the identity construction processes of ethnic minorities, looking at the processes experienced particularly by third generation British Sikh ethnic minorities and construction of ethnic identities and imaginaries. Next, we briefly review the concept of liminality before moving to the social media and ethnic identity construction processes.

2. Liminality in the Realm of Social Media

Liminality is defined by Van Gennep (1909) as the rites of change, relating to place, age, state that individuals go through. The term was then popularised by Turner (1967) who focused on the ‘interstructural’ phase individuals go through upon a change, which he described as “betwixt and between” (p.4).

Looking at earlier studies of liminality relating to consumption, Noble and Walker (1997) suggested that consumption can in fact assist consumers with a means of reducing the feeling of liminality, by offering a variation of marketplace opportunities. However, more recently, consumer researchers have suggested that liminality symbolises the uncertain state of changes. The concept of liminality has been applied in consumer research as enabling an outlet of emotions for students (Bannister and Piacentini, 2008), as an influence on consumption practices in motherhood (Cody and Lawlor, 2011), in tweens (Cody and Lawlor, 2010), and in the context of liminal consumer identities upon milestones, such as marriage (Fagbola, McEachern and Raftopolou, 2018), and pregnancy (Andrea, 2012). However, there is a dearth of research relating to how the consumption of liminal social media spaces, informs acculturation involving culture change and identity construction. Hence the significance of this research study.

Although entering a liminal phase is typically anticipated prior to milestone events in one’s life, scholars also show that liminality could be triggered when the realities, beings, experiences and boundaries are all transitional. That is, meanings are being restructured and are unsustainable (Buchanan-Oliver and Cruz, 2011); which, we argue, is exemplified by the changing reality and boundaries induced by the use of social media. This is supported by Sambasivan et al’s., (2008) argument, that as we experience the journeys of daily life, amplified by technology, between first, second and third places, the transformative power of technological devices is immense, moreover they play a central role in providing the individual with a link to their private world. By creating a divide through the possibility of multiple selves,

the use of social media enables one to create a restructuring of meanings, which is expected to trigger entering a transitional phase and a self-journey. Interestingly, consumer researchers have long argued that periods of transition are significant periods or phases where consumers negotiate new identities and in turn tend to experience upheaval and a sense of uncertainty in their consumption behaviours (Schouten, 1991). Therefore, the question remains, as to how one experiences this upheaval relating to ethnic identity, when engaging in the consumption of a social media platform, but also being a member of the online community?

The liminal realm constructed by social media and its effects over the individuals and their identity processes, would be contingent on the connection within and across social media communities (O'Connor and Mackeogh, 2007; Dessart et al., 2015). The communities that the individuals engage with through social media and the consequently exposed discourse, influence the individuals in unique ways to construct their identities. For example, Madge and O'Connor (2005) find that the liminal nature of online communities can encourage new mothers to "try out" different motherhood versions. Similarly, LaPoe et al., (2017) illustrate how social media spaces provide liminality, whereby academics can create different selves for both professional and personal purposes, which they can incorporate or isolate. Interestingly, Hogue and Forrest (2018) argue that the social media realm, is indeed a liminal space where students feel valued as a result of communication and exchange with different cultures and consequently develop cultural competence.

Scholars have shown the effects of social media consumption over cultural identities of consumers, establishing a post-cultural portal of interaction boosting creativity and encouraging consumer learning (Hu et al., 2017). Given the liminal characteristics of social media, it bodes interest to ask how the liminal characteristics of this post-cultural realm will affect different cultural groups, and particularly in particular ethnic minorities, their cultural identity construction processes. Thus, the use of social media by different ethnic minority and

immigrant groups and its influence on the acculturation and ethnic identity construction processes, has drawn interest from scholars and this likely will continue to be the case as technologies evolve (Kizgin et al., 2020).

3. Social Media and Consumer's Ethnic Identity

Scholars have shown that ICT, particularly social media use plays an important role in ethnic identity construction processes (Kizgin et al., 2018a; 2020; Li and Tsai, 2015; Chiu et al., 2015). For ethnic minorities and immigrants, social media offers ways to learn about other cultures (Kapoor et al., 2018; Dessart et al., 2015; Alam and Imran, 2015), as well as participate in and understand other cultures, while establishing a cultural identity (Yau et al., 2017; Li and Tsai, 2015). For instance, Diaz Andrade and Doolin (2016) find that for resettled refugees social media use provides the agency to participate in society and thus accelerate their social inclusion. Similarly, Lim et al., (2016) argue that social media provides a means for immigrants to sustain relationships with both home and host societies. Social media has also been identified as a medium to construct a shared identity (Lim et al., 2016; Sun and Qui, 2016) and a portal where immigrants might gain social recognition through sharing of success and achievements (Lorenzana, 2016). Bork-Huffer (2016) shows that social media, although not causing “placelessness”, may alter how place and space are interpreted and perceived by the German immigrants in Singapore. Bork-Huffer (2016), outlines the empowering role of social media use for the immigrant in sustaining connection with the locale. Whilst mostly seen as a catalyst to ease the acculturation processes of immigrants, research also identifies the unhinging effects of social media for different cultural groups, such as frequent connection with home culture, inhibiting the acculturation process ongoing with the host culture (Lim and Pham, 2016).

Most recently, Dey et al., (2020) emphasised the fact that due to the rise in online networks, individual identities cannot be confined to our understanding of cultures in the

traditional sense as national boundaries; rather we should now consider the existence of digital consumer culture and respective digital acculturation i.e. acculturating or adapting to the various virtual environments. They also outline a tripartite effect of digital culture over individuals. First, they argue that through enhanced freedom and information reach, digital culture attains empowerment for individuals. This empowerment, they argue, is only boosted by engagement beyond cultural boundaries. However, more importantly, they also suggest that there is in fact, blurred boundaries between offline and online identities of individuals. This continuous feedback between offline and online realms means different selves are shared with online communities, which inadvertently results in decompartmentalization of “the self”. However, when considering second and third generation ethnic minorities, we believe, this decompartmentalization of the self and blurred boundaries between online and offline identities goes far beyond the traditional conceptualization of acculturation and the resulting culture change and identity construction processes.

For example, the traditional conceptualizations of acculturation depict second and third generation ethnic minorities as similar to that of a ‘*pendulum*’- to-ing and fro-ing between home and host cultures (Askegaard et al., 2005). This implies that they have to reconcile their ethnic identity, between host culture, with whom they interact, socialise and develop a group identity (Rumbaut, 1994; Yazdiha, 2019) with their ethnic discourse, to which they are also exposed to through social media (Groenewold and Valk, 2017). However, social media use by consumers transcends the boundaries of time and space (Kizgin et al., 2018b) challenging the use of contrasting terms like heritage and host cultures and the notion of cultural adaptation of mainly host cultures by ethnic minorities (Jamal et al., 2019).

Moreover, other scholars argue that ethnic minorities are in a state of “social liminality”, a psychologically stressful, transitional state (Simich et al., 2009). Particularly for tight-knit communities such as the British Sikh, these communities act akin to communities-

of-practice, involved in joint activities reproducing the community (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Husband, 2005), which for the British Sikh community is enculturation to the ethnic identity and is fulfilled by the elders and other role models of the community. This constant conflict and inbetweenness is bound to cause multiple identities, as well as conflicting loyalties (e.g., Alba and Nee 2003; Bean et al., 2010; Becker 2010; Crul, Schneider, and Lelie, 2012).

Hence, while social media and digital culture in a way could enhance this conflict, the online realm and its liminal characteristics such as enhanced freedom and anonymity could also create a funnel where ethnic minorities can escape from the cultural tensions of their offline identities, and attain empowerment (Passos, 2011) and enable them to strip off their cultural role sets or “acted” selves. Against this background, it then becomes important to understand the role of the liminal characteristics of social media as an empowerment and ethnic identity construction and conflict settlement agent for third generation ethnic minorities. Given the liminal aspect of social media (Instagram) which encourages individuals to enter a transitional phase, in terms of their identity constructions, how does this liminality manifest itself in the identity construction processes of third generation British Sikhs in the U.K.? In order to investigate this, we conduct a multi-method study, focused on third generation British Sikhs, engaging with the social networking platform of Instagram.

4. Methodology

This paper is based on an interpretivist study which explored just how third generation British born Sikhs engaged with the social media platform known as Instagram. Looking specifically at just how this platform and its associated communities, impacted identity construction amongst the third generation British Sikh community. Instagram is known as being an image-based social media platform (Pittman and Reich, 2016) that allows users to edit both pictures

and videos. However, 71% of the users of Instagram tend to be under 35 and the most popular users are aged between 25-34 (Clement, 2020b). In fact, it was recently estimated that the average user of Instagram spends at least 53 minutes a day or more on this social media platform (Wagner, 2018).

This study adopts a multi-method research design, which consisted of observations, participant observations, netnography (Kozinets, 2002; Bowler, 2010; Kozinets et al., 2014) and offline semi-structured interviews. As Table 1 indicates, the data collection was conducted in four phases which took place over 17 months (January 2020- May 2021). As the first author was herself a third generation British Sikh, she was able to immerse herself within this environment and actively engage with various members of the British Sikh community on Instagram, whilst also declaring her research interests with the various members on Instagram. Along with the interview transcripts, the observations of 25 individual accounts and netnography resulted in significant amounts of field notes, describing the first authors own reflections and emotions (Biraghi and Gambetti, 2018) with regards to the tensions and issues that were faced by young British Sikhs as they came from the offline world and into this virtual world. The first author was also able to observe the Instagram profiles (25 profiles) of community members and observe how identity was portrayed through social media and made notes accordingly. The first author's contacts on Instagram were the initial point to get access to the informants. The informants were chosen based on the frequency of posting, as well as the nature of the content of their posts which varied from ethnic and cultural to more personal content. It was important to observe the distinction between the conversations and communications that were taking place through Instagram versus the views that were portrayed through interviews face to face and when discussions took place about their culture, as this is where tensions seem to arise.

Insert Table 1 about here.

Informants for the face to face interviews were recruited using a convenience sampling approach and individuals were recruited through the authors network of contacts and they were therefore easily accessible to the researcher. In total there were 25 interviews that took place face to face, but alongside this the Instagram accounts of these 25 informants were being consistently observed for further content analysis. The profiles of the informants are presented in Table 2. The interviews were transcribed as the interviews took place so that the researcher was sensitized to the data as it was collected. The observations and field notes that were made by the researcher, were saved into a word document and then read line by line and analysed using a thematic analysis (Joffe, 2012; Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Insert Table 2 about here.

Following the key processes relating to analysis and interpretation of qualitative data as recommended by many scholars (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994, Spiggle, 1994), the data collection, analysis and interpretation progressed in an iterative and interrelated manner as the researcher moved between the online and offline environments. Charmaz's (2006) constant comparative method was also considered when coding the data, as Charmaz (2006) encourages that data is read line-by-line and then sentence clusters are performed.

5. Findings

Our findings demonstrate that Instagram is in fact a virtual and liminal third world (or a new space like home). As third generation British Sikhs sway back and forth between the offline world and the online world, similar to an "oscillating pendulum" (Askegaard et al., 2005, p.166), it seems that the offline world is a world that is associated with numerous role sets (Biddle, 1979) tending to the collective Sikh culture as well as the individualised British culture. Consequently, there are numerous daily tensions surrounding this which result in many

of them feeling as if they have a torn identity or self (Jafari and Goulding, 2008). What our findings indicate is that the overall liminal characteristics (freedom, anonymity) of this third world of Instagram, encourage third generation British Sikhs to enter this virtual space to seek freedom from these many tensions and empowers them with the freedom to speak and convey the aspects of their identity that they would like to. Further, we find that the aspects of their identity, that they convey through Instagram, are the more *aspired* or *desired* parts of their identity which do not conform to the traditional collectivistic Sikh culture as much, but align more so with the members of their digital community, which portray acculturated and more global but largely Westernised characteristics. The findings of our study show that Instagram is an especially significant tool for young third generation British Sikhs, as they are able to convey aspects of their identity that they perhaps ordinarily may not do so in their day to day offline life. What's more Instagram is in fact an introspective identity construction portal for third generation British Sikhs as they engage with the global Insta-communities and the associated acculturative characteristics. We document how young British Sikhs, experience identity negotiation and construction and convey an acculturated identity within this virtual third world, away from the pressures of their offline world. It is evident that this virtual space, is a space that evokes a great deal of introspection, thought and supportive conversation around the acculturated identities that are conveyed by young third generation British Sikhs. It seems that Instagram forges new ways for young British Sikhs to think beyond their offline world and encourages them to seek empowerment. This study outlines three key emergent themes that describe just how the liminal space of Instagram encourages young British Sikhs to re-evaluate their ethnic identity and attempt to convey a sense of who they are. We name them as follows and discuss below: (1) Untangling identity away from offline tensions (2) Empowerment and identity introspection (3) Communitas as an acculturation agent involving culture change: performing the imagined identity.

5.1 Untangling identity away from offline tensions

It is evident that living the realities of possessing the Sikh, British and British Sikh cultures results in numerous pressures, conflicts and role sets (Biddle, 1979) for young British Sikhs. However, this liminal virtual space, provides young British Sikhs with a sense of freedom to deal with what Turner (1987) describe as the “factors of existence”. The most obvious tensions that were repeatedly cited are associated with the collective Sikh community and the role sets (Biddle, 1979) that are enforced by the older generation parents. RKG a young female explained:

“it’s always you must behave like this, you are Indian or the Gurus made this sacrifice for us, so you must behave like this blah blah. I get so annoyed with my mum sometimes, I just feel like saying get with it lol.” (RKG, Sikh Female)

The frustration is highly evident from the tone of RKG as she repeatedly refers to how her mother tells her she “must” behave a certain way. In fact, she conveys her annoyance at her mother’s attitude and feels like telling her to “get with it”, but yet she doesn’t seem to do so, therefore she needs a space where she has the freedom to say what she feels. It is also evident that the mother uses religion to try and reaffirm certain behaviours, as she cites that her mother says that the “gurus made this sacrifice for us”. It is evident that RKG is clearly frustrated and torn because she feels the older generation is not moving with the times, demonstrating one of the struggles that many individuals from ethnic backgrounds may face.

Experiencing a condition of ambiguity and a paradox of confusion of the categories that they have to align to, many of the young British Sikhs that engage with Instagram convey a wish for freedom, particularly young British Sikh females. In fact, HIC explains further as she says:

“it is not ok for each to grow from a community with so many cultural expectations and traditions. It is sad that this is the reality for so many brown girls. This is why I like to post online because it makes me feel free and we talk”. (HIC, Sikh Female)

It is evident from the quote that HIC believes that Instagram provides a safe portal where she can strip off her daily offline tensions and unload in the support of camaraderie. Therefore, it is easier for them to unconsciously move away from their conflicts between ethnic and acculturated identities. In a sense, as they engage in this virtual space, young British Sikhs, appear to experience this sense of “deterretorialization” (Ustuner and Holt, 2007), where they use this virtual space as a source of emotional support and feel that their online community understands and relates to them. Hence, at the first instance our informants see social media as providing a helping mechanism through concealment of identities and support from “others-like-me”. With this help, they can “be” who they are, away from daily conflicts and culture clashes.

5.2 Empowerment and identity introspection

As a liminal space of freedom that consists largely of images, Instagram is evidently a virtual space that enables third generation British Sikhs to seek aspects of their imagined and idealised identities, which they are not able to ordinarily experience in front of strict older generations when offline. RGF explains:

“the pictures and the profile that I put up are more about me and who I want to be. I mean obviously my mum and dad don’t use Insta do they, so I can say and do what I like and to be fair I think as long as I’m okay with everything I post, then that’s fine”. (RGF, Sikh Female)

This online social networking site is clearly utilised as a space of freedom by RGF, where she can use her Instagram profile to perform and develop her identity with the narrative that she would like to convey (Cover, 2012) to her online community. She clearly interprets this virtual space as her space where she can convey what she wants to about herself as she says, *“it’s about me and who I want to be”*. In fact, what’s interesting is that she points out that her parents do not have access to this space, therefore she has control over it and can say and do as she pleases. The freedom gained through concealment from the cultural gatekeepers (Holt, 2016) (i.e. elders, family and members of offline British Sikh community) gives our participants the chance to seek and explore who they really are as SSC says:

“obviously I wouldn’t let my mum on Insta lol but yeah I post pics of myself that I think, say something about who I am or with my girlfriend.” (SSC, Sikh Male).

SSC uses this platform to freely convey aspects of his identity that he clearly knows that his mother would not ordinarily approve of. Therefore, the realm of Instagram is a realm of pure possibility as far as identity reflection and conveyance is concerned for young British Sikhs. Novel configurations relating to identity can potentially arise without the limitations imposed by cultural boundaries.

The independent, individualistic and empowered tone in the participants’ voice is also highly evident, which is a complete contrast to the voice of frustration that is demonstrated in some of the informants as they seek the freedom to speak above. The courage is achieved through the camaraderie of similar-thinking online peers, while the freedom is enabled by the liminal realm of Instagram, both in turn creating an empowered state. This correlates with Li’s (2016) work which shows social media is a powerful psychological empowerment agent, through enhanced engagement with like-minded people. It seems that as young British Sikhs engage with Instagram, they form and/or gain access to like-minded people and they transition

into a new empowered state. In fact, Van Gennep (1960) himself described the transitions that accompany every change of place, state, social position and age. Therefore, we conclude that Instagram is a being used as a “symbolic device for changing and adapting identity within a social structure” (Houston, 1999, p.543) that is new. Hence, what we observe here is that, in the company of the like-minded people, our participants feel empowered to freely explore their identities freed from their offline expectations and cultural gatekeepers.

5.3 Communitas as an ethnic identity construction agent involving culture change:

Performing the imagined self

Our findings also note the extensive role of the online communities of like-minded people and how they not only explore, but also perform aspired identities. The groups that are formed of like-minded people, show alignment with what McKeown (2013) also discusses as ‘virtual communitas’. Virtual communitas do not show the characteristics of typical social hierarchies as such, but they are rather communal groups in which all are equal; and this is certainly characteristic of Instagram. In fact, within this study the virtual communitas are highly significant within the lives of your British Sikhs, who are so engaged with Instagram as a tool to convey identity. Instagram then becomes a portal where those that posted ‘selfies’ of themselves are surrounded in a community of similar and like-minded people. The ties that bound this group together are the daily practices of posting ‘selfies’ of themselves, or their feelings at that present time. This act of posting is a way to perform their imagined selves (Belk and Yeh, 2011), which is then reaffirmed by the members of their virtual communitas, and in turn encouraging more engagement with the Instagram community. In fact, there is a reliance on the insta-community for support. TKD elaborates further:

“when I post pics in a bikini and everyone says nice things, then yea I do think I’m doing something right and I post more and more. It makes me happy! Maybe I

wouldn't want my in-laws to see them but they are fine with my Insta followers."

(TKD, Sikh Female)

Clearly wearing a bikini is interpreted to be a Westernised behaviour for TKD and whilst she clearly knows that the older generations of the ethnic Sikh community or her in laws, would perhaps not approve of such pictures. She clearly feels proud of such photos of herself and how she is conveying her identity. In fact, she gets validation through her Instagram account and through her insta-community, through posting these pictures as she says, *"it makes me happy!"*. Therefore, while Instagram creates a space that is "secluded, partially or completely from the realm of the culturally defined and ordered states and statuses" (Turner, 1967, p.92) and allows young British Sikhs the freedom to introspectively reflect on their acculturated identity projects (Ustuner and Holt, 2007), it also creates virtual communities which act as identity affirming agents. Perhaps what is more valuable is that, through support and affirming each other, virtual *communitas* also create the power to rebel against the dogma that have less consideration for the contemporary lifestyles. IKJ a young Sikh female was clearly frustrated and passionately voiced a rebellion with regards to the collective Sikh culture, which she perhaps would not ordinarily voice on a day to day basis:

*"I am giving a shout to myself and all the women who found themselves hiding in the bathroom to get away from unrealistic expectations thrown at us. Ladies it's time to f**k sh*t up. We are the generation that will question bulls**t. We are the generation that will leave toxic environments. It's time to take up more space. It's time to get out of the bathroom"* (IKJ, Sikh Female)

The rebellion and freedom can be heard in her tone and this is typically characteristic of liminality, as it is during the liminal state that the social structure of 'virtual *communitas*' is formed (McKeown, 2013). As she refers to having to hide in the bathroom and trying to free

herself from the “unrealistic expectations” her sense of empowerment through this virtual *communitas* is evident, however this is an empowerment that comes from exposure to the West and clearly not from the Sikh culture. However, what is perhaps more empowering, and reassuring was the affirming responses that she received. Where individuals said as follows:

“there is no time better then now to stand up in your truth and power, rise up.”

(MSK, Sikh Female)

“Love everything about this” (RKH, Sikh Female)

“We can all relate to someone who is suffering in silence” (HKB, Sikh Female)

“it’s a lifetime of being taught to ignore your own needs in favour of being polite”

(SKC, Sikh Female)

It can be seen from the above statements that the *communitas* that is formed further reaffirms the behaviours of IKJ. MSK in particular says it is important to “*stand up in your truth and power*” with regards to who you are. Many followers of IKJ convey their “love” for her statements, her pictures of who she is. Another respondent, HKB, makes a reference to “suffering in silence” offline; yet perhaps she is referring to others who are only at the phase of reviewing who they are and not yet *performing*, and clearly points towards the help available for each other through the *communitas*. It is evident that the *communitas* that are formed with each participant’s profile are very much the *communitas* that support one another’s behaviours. While Cayla and Eckhardt (2008) describe the transnational imagined community in relation to branding, it is evident that Instagram in itself is too a space of imagined communities. In fact, the profiles that are created by individuals tend to consist of followers of like- minded individuals who affirm and reaffirm behaviours, therefore resulting in the performance of the imagined identity. In fact, IKJ, responded to all the affirming comments and said:

“Thank you for sharing! I am in awe of how much support and love we as women have during hard times! Today seeing all these posts makes me feel heard”. (IKJ, Sikh Female)

Through her Instagram profile she felt a sense of “support” and “heard”, whereas in real day to day offline life she clearly did not and would turn to the virtual world for reaffirmation of her progressive views and behaviours. Hence with this empowerment and support we find our participants are freed, to construct and settle the conflicts of their ethnic identities and perform their imagined selves.

6. Discussion

6.1 Reflection on literature, theory and proposition development

Our understanding of marketplaces have long migrated to multicultural and post-cultural places with consumers on different spectrums of ethnic identities. As digital realms became a pertinent way of understanding how individuals interact with each other socially (Muhammad et al., 2017), the effects of this digital migration over identity construction processes has become of interest. Yet, these effects would not be equally absorbed among different consumer groups. For second and third generation individuals who have constant internal conflicts between home and host cultures, enhanced exposure to both cultural constructs, values, norms and such via social media, this will potentially lead to a more nuanced effect on identity construction processes (Groenewold and Valk, 2017).

Our findings reveal participants untangling identity away from offline tensions pointing to cultural transformation that is facilitated through dynamic involvement with platforms like Instagram. Hence, we first proposed that of:

Social media use will have a nuanced impact on second and third generation minority consumer groups’ ethnic identity construction processes.

Our findings point to empowerment and identity introspection as our participants experience imagined and idealized identities that are enabled by the liminal realm of Instagram. This is in line with those who argue that digital realms and by extension social media are not bound by time and place constraints, and hence they create a third-placeness which is “betwixt and between” and described as liminal. Similarly, scholars also characterise ethnic minorities to be in a constant state of liminality (Simich et al., 2009), and suggest that such liminality will create both enculturation to home and acculturation to host culture, as well as multiple identity formations in between (Becker 2010; Crul, Schneider, and Lelie, 2012; Jamal et al., 2019). By changing the realities and boundaries of interaction, we believe social media will create a liminal realm, which will also have effects on second and third generation minorities’ identity construction processes. Thus, following from that, we also propose that:

Liminality created by social media will provoke second and third generation British Sikh users to enter a phase of identity reconstruction, which will have both enculturation and acculturating effects.

Our findings point to the role of communitas as an ethnic identity construction agent, involving culture change and therefore facilitating participants to perform their imagined self. This is in line with scholars who point out that social media assists individuals to gain empowerment and to acculturate to the digital culture (Kizgin et al., 2018b; Dey et al., 2020) though concealment of identities and alleviating them from social boundaries, whilst exposing them to increased accessibility of a variety of “others” and communitas. Certainly for ethnic minorities enhanced access to communities will enhance the availability of a wider range of thought, ideas, opinions and will inadvertently effect the way identities will be reconsidered and reconstructed. This influence may result in unravelling and confusion at first but once the dust settles, it will lead to achieving “the imagined self”. Hence,

Social media use will help individuals to access to communitas, find empowerment and reaffirmation and eventually settle in to imagined identities.

Indeed, our findings highlight that Instagram encourages third generation young British Sikhs to enter a phase of identity reconstruction which emerges due to the liminal characteristics of social media, which make locales and identities ambiguous, concealed whilst simultaneously opening up the possibilities of multiple selves, and expanding the social span of interaction (Buchanan-Oliver and Cruz, 2011; Beech, 2011). As we illustrate through the process outlined within Figure 1, for third generation British Sikhs, engagement with social media is firstly a way to relieve the conflict and tensions they experience between their Westernised acculturated selves and ethnic identities. Thus, they enter the online realm with conflicts and at first, they show a tendency to seek change and relief amongst familiar communitas through ICT, whilst they unconsciously move away from their current selves. It was evident that as young British Sikhs engage in this virtual space as concealed social media users. That is, their profiles are not accessible for “*cultural gatekeepers*” (Holt, 2016), from whom they are seeking relief. Young British Sikhs therefore use social media to be liberated from their ethnic role expectations and social constraints and in turn become more acculturated in the sense of learning about and experiencing identities that they find relevant and important. In fact, Tambyah (1996) describes how online individuals are in a liminoid state provoked by the concealment offered by technologies available. Consequently, they become frequent users of this virtual space and used this virtual space to reflectively air their issues and negotiate identity.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

We also find that through engagement with like-minded people, British Sikhs strip off their tensions, but they also find empowerment. They attain camaraderie, empowerment and

are consequently encouraged, to introspectively view their identities. In a way, they are empowered to thoroughly investigate who they are, what they believe in, in light of the freedom from the norms that are enforced on them. This resonates with Guta and Karolak's (2015) findings relating to young Saudi women, who use social media to renegotiate their identities, alleviated from cultural and societal norms and boundaries. This introspective identity negotiation, we find, enables for young British Sikhs to form the silhouette of their imagined identities and assert their own versions of acculturated selves. Similar to the findings of Belk and Yeh's (2011) work relating to travellers' photos and how they create assemblages of their imagined selves, we highlight that Instagram, its respective *communitas*, freedom and space nudge individuals to reflect on their identities and freely perform their selves.

Further, our study shows that within the liminal space of Instagram, young British Sikhs have carved out virtual *communitas*, which act as a resource of reflexive emotional support and empowerment agents, and thus they also become the vessels for their ethnic identity construction processes. Moreover, in the camaraderie of the *communitas*, they settle into their imagined identities, become comfortable with who they are and in turn, they show support and empower others who are yet to do so and, in a sense, encourage an element of acculturation towards this virtual third place. Indeed, as Holt (2016) shows social media amplifies smaller or weaker voices, by bringing in support from others which are normally not reachable. Others also show the role of social media to form collective identities around certain causes, i.e. brands, products, social or political movements (Laroche et al., 2012; Habibi et al., 2014; Gerbaudo and Trere, 2015). In a way, these young British Sikhs identity projects are the causes that acquire the support from their *communitas*, as they become the activists of their imagined identities.

6.2 Contributions to research and theoretical implications

The first contribution of this paper is to show that social media creates a liminal space in which individuals can safely renegotiate and settle in to perform their imagined identities. Although how ICT plays a role in ethnic identity construction processes has been investigated to an extent (Vancea and Olivera, 2013), the interplay between characteristics of social media with minority users' ethnic identity construction processes has been largely neglected. We show this with the third generation of British Sikhs, who face daily tensions between their acculturated selves and responsibilities to act in accordance with their aligned and imposed norms by the gatekeepers. Hence, we show that ICT and social media can free them from those tensions and empower them to experience independent and culturally reflexive identities as and when they wish to do so.

In line with Jamal et al., (2019) who called for considering the role of space in identity creation beyond spatial metaphors like 'here' and 'back home', this research contributes to the consumer acculturation literature (e.g., Askegaard et al., 2005) by exploring how and in what sense third generation ethnic minority consumers really experience and negotiate their identities given the interplay among global and local consumer cultures and the liminality of digital platforms like Instagram. Given our participants' use of Instagram transcends the boundaries of time and space (Kizgin et al., 2018b), we argue that social media provides a space where our participants found empowerment to assert their Western, individualist, independent identities, which they perhaps already possessed.

Moreover, past research has reported that ethnic minority consumers' identity position are discursive outcomes of negotiating among acculturation forces that are aligned with the home, host, and global consumer cultures (e.g., Askegaard et al., 2005; Kizgin et al., 2020; 2018b) underestimating how and in what sense consumption of social media spaces like Instagram provide liminality (LaPoe et al., 2017) and inform acculturation. We contribute by showing the extent to which consumption of Instagram facilitates enhanced freedom and anonymity

creating a funnel where participants escape from cultural norms and expectations (Passos, 2011) experiencing identities of their own choice. We further contribute towards the ethnic identity construction literature ((Kizgin et al., 2018a; 2020; Li and Tsai, 2015; Chiu et al., 2015) by showing the extent to which the liminality of Instagram facilitates untangling of identities away from offline tensions, empowering participants seeking introspection, empowerment and an agency while experiencing imagined and idealized identities.

We, therefore, conclude that our participants' use of Instagram went far beyond the notion of a simple cultural adaptation of British culture by our participants as manifested in traditional conceptualization of acculturation (Jamal et al., 2019). We call for future research to further explore the capacity and capabilities of online and other virtual spaces as enablers for experiencing independent and culturally reflexive identities not by ethnic minorities, but also other cultural groups.

6.3 Implications for practice

From a managerial perspective, alongside recognising the fluidity of identity itself, brands and organisations alike should recognise the opportunities that come forth through the liminal characteristics of virtual spaces and the *communitas*. Social networks provide lucrative access to brand communities and develop sustainable relationships with consumers (Hutton and Fosdick, 2011; Ashley and Tuten, 2015). It is possible for brands to gain trust and attain positive influence over consumers through their peers through the *communitas* (Ozdemir et al., 2020). Therefore, particularly for ethnic and cultural brands, such *communitas* provide potential to build and access consumer bases. For example, brands may focus on using influencers from the same *communitas* as third generation ethnic minorities are media-savvy and socially empowered individuals seeking to experience independent and culturally reflexive

identities. Moreover, having a robust social media presence on platforms like Instagram can further facilitate innovation and active engagement utilising user input from same communities.

Furthermore, whilst the freedom and fluidity associated with these virtual spaces encourage reflexivity with regards to identity, they also pose challenges that come forth with transitional processes and strip the consumers to a more vulnerable state (Voice Group, 2010). For those of ethnic backgrounds or those that have migrated to a new space, such communities help them to understand their own behaviours as well as the behaviour and traits that they should adopt in order to acculturate and adjust to their new world. Therefore, while such communities could be beneficial to brands in terms of how they reach out to key audiences, brands should also be aware of the vulnerability that liminality poses. Prematurely aggressive branding, or misrepresentations of consumers' aspirational values, may result in withdrawal from the brand (Broderick et al., 2011). Instead, deeper understanding and supporting the consumers' reflective identity construction process may be more beneficial.

Our study would also have implications for policy makers aiming to enhance societal wellbeing and intercultural interaction. Vorster et al., (2020) show that marketing channels provide ways for governments to engage with consumers and create legitimisation of reconciliation between different ethnic groups. Therefore, understanding social media communities and impact of individuals ethnic identity construction processes is vital for policy makers wanting to promote inclusive societies (Figueiredo et al., 2015).

6.4 Limitations and future research direction

This research is solely focused on British Sikhs and their online communities and it demonstrates how this virtual and liminal space creates a unique community where exchange of ideas empowers one another, without the watchful eye of the older generations as was traditionally customary. Theorizing from this context, this study also shows how day-to-day

cultural conflicts of third generation ethnic groups can be alleviated through the camaraderie enabled by ICT. Yet, given the expanding role of ICT over our lives, more research is needed to understand how the consumption of ICT would impact identity re/constructions in other unique contexts. Furthermore, as our findings highlighted, many of the tensions that third generation British Sikh experience stem from the conflicting requirements of between their communities-of-practice (requiring for a specialist identity) and the host culture which requires for a more inclusive identity. Although this paper did not conceptualise these conflicts in that detailed manner, further research should look into this relationship as this conceptualisation of subcultures as communities-of-practice, might highlight valuable insights as to how to resolve such conflicts.

7. Conclusion

This paper investigated the role of social media and online social networks over the ethnic identity construction processes of acculturated ethnic groups. In particular, we focused on the third generation British Sikhs engaging in introspective ethnic identity reconstruction processes, through the use of social media, and Instagram in particular, given its liminal characteristics. ICT creates an ambiguous third world, where locales are insignificant and new identities are possible, which builds the premise that ICT will restructure the realities of individuals and encourage a self-journey. For third generation British Sikhs, our study shows that social media is part of that liminal world, where participants can strip-off the tensions and conflicts resultant from their Westernised (British) vs ethnic (Sikh) selves. Further, we have also shown that through use of social media our participants go through a phase of introspective identity review and settle in to perform their imagined identities in the support and camaraderie of the online communitas.

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Table 1. Stages of the Data Collection Process

Time Period	Research Phase	Research Methods
January 19 – June 19	<u>Exploratory Phase</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Observations of Instagram accounts and behaviours
June 19 – December 19	<u>Phase 1</u> Development of emergent themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Online participant observations - Face to face interviews (4) these were then analysed. - Further face to face interview with users (4).
January 20- March 20	<u>Phase 2</u> Development of core constructs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Online participant observations continued. - In-depth interviews (5). These were then analysed. - A further (5) interviews were then carried out and then analysed

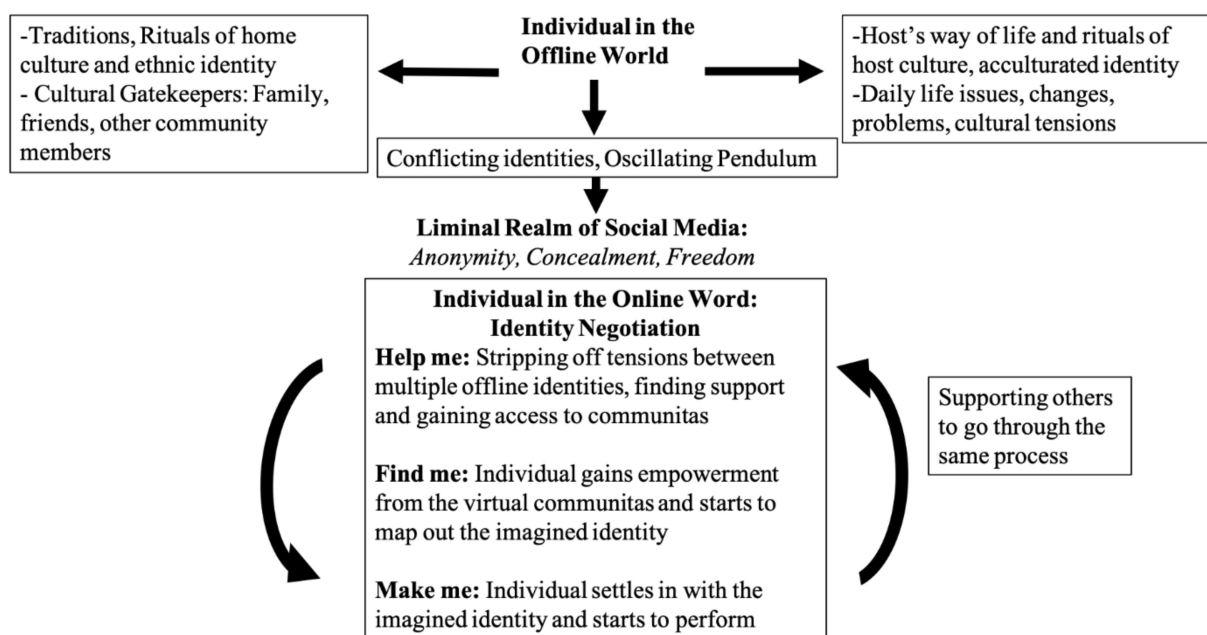
March 20 – May 20	<u>Phase 3</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In -depth interviews (7) were conducted and analysed. - The 25 Instagram accounts were observed throughout for the sake of continuity within the interviewing process.
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Table 2. Informants' Profile

PSEUDONYM NAME	AGE	GENDER	LOCATION	OCCUPATION
RUPI (RKG)	33	FEMALE	LONDON	RETAIL MANAGER
GURJ (GIS)	29	MALE	LONDON	BANKER
HENNA (HIC)	30	FEMALE	LEICESTER	NURSERY MANAGER
RUBY (RGF)	28	FEMALE	COVENTRY	SELF EMPLOYED
SUKH (SSC)	29	MALE	COVENTRY	SELF EMPLOYED
TANIA (TKD)	30	FEMALE	NUNEATON	PHARMACIST
INDY (IKJ)	28	FEMALE	LONDON	DOCTOR
MANNY (MSK)	32	FEMALE	SOUTHAMPTON	IT CONSULTANT
RAMAN (RKH)	30	FEMALE	LONDON	BANKING
HARVI (HKB)	27	FEMALE	BIRMINGHAM	TEACHER
TONY (TKD)	30	FEMALE	DOVER	BANKING TELLER
SHARAN (SKC)	29	FEMALE	LONDON	PERSONAL ASSISTANT
JAY (JSB)	28	MALE	LEAMINGTON	SELF EMPLOYED
RONNIE (RST)	26	MALE	COVENTRY	GYM MANAGER
PREET (PKD)	29	FEMALE	WARWICK	LECTURER
SANDY (SKH)	25	FEMALE	BIRMINGHAM	PSYCHOLOGIST
KULLY (KSS)	30	MALE	LONDON	MEDIA INDUSTRY

RUBY (RKB)	27	FEMALE	LEICESTER	TELECOMS MANAGER
AMAR (AST)	28	MALE	LONDON	ACCOUNTANT
NAVEEN (NSD)	30	MALE	LONDON	ESTATE AGENT
ARJAN (AST)	26	MALE	LEAMINGTON	ENGINEER
PETE (PSK)	28	MALE	NORTHAMPTON	CONSULTANT
PRIT (PSL)	30	MALE	LONDON	FINANCIAL MANAGER
SUNNY (SKK)	27	FEMALE	BIRMINGHAM	SELF EMPLOYED
RAJ (RKS)	34	FEMALE	LEAMINGTON	CHARITY MANAGER

Figure 1. Liminal Realm of social media as a tool to settle into the imagined identities for third generation British Sikhs



Author Contribution Statement

Amandeep Takhar: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, and Writing – Review & Editing.

Gaye Bebek: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – Original Draft & Writing – Review and Editing.

Ahmad Jamal – Writing Original Draft and Writing – Review and Editing.