

CULTURAL AESTHETICS & GLOBAL BUSINESS: HOW INSTAGRAM INFLUENCERS SHAPE CROSS-BORDER CONSUMPTION

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ABSTRACT

In a globalised digital economy, Instagram influencers have evolved into powerful cultural intermediaries who do more than just promote products; they reshape meaning through aesthetics. This paper explores how influencers use culturally rooted visuals and storytelling to make global products feel personally relevant to local and international audiences. Through case studies of Indian influencers popularising Korean skincare, global influencers styling Indian aesthetics, and the Prada - Kolhapuri chappal conversation, the study illustrates how visual storytelling influences consumer perception, authenticity, and identity. By embedding cultural cues into content, influencers shape hybrid consumer identities and drive cross-border consumption. Their ability to blend global trends with local visual traditions makes them more than content creators; they are aesthetic diplomats who bridge regional cultures and global branding strategies. The findings raise critical questions around cultural ownership, value perception, and the future of influencer-driven commerce.

Keywords: cultural aesthetics, Instagram influencers, cross-border consumption, visual storytelling, global branding, authenticity

INTRODUCTION

Although adaptation and culture have long shared a connection, the rise of digital platforms like Instagram has introduced a new kind of visual storytelling system. Influencers today do more than promote products; they reshape global aesthetics into locally meaningful narratives using carefully curated images. By aligning visual identity with cultural context and tailoring global products to resonate with local tastes, influencers now serve as cultural bridges, helping brands connect, communicate, and cross borders in ways that feel both familiar and aspirational.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the digital economy, visual culture plays a powerful role in how meaning is constructed and circulated across borders. Influencers on platforms like Instagram often act as visual storytellers who embed cultural aesthetics, colors, symbols, rituals, dress, and design elements into their content in ways that shape how audiences interpret identity, aspiration, and value (Wang & Huang, 2022). Through carefully crafted imagery, they make global products feel personal, relatable, and culturally embedded. Michaelsen, Collini, and Jacob (2022) argue that this aesthetic storytelling enables influencers to build trust and emotional resonance in ways that traditional advertising cannot, especially when representing aspirational lifestyles or personal rituals.

As global brands expand into new markets, cultural integration becomes a branding imperative.

Influencers serve as cultural intermediaries, translating global trends into locally relevant narratives. For example, Indian influencers showcasing Korean skincare in wedding-prep content, or international fashion creators styling Indian textiles with Western silhouettes, reveal how visual content facilitates cross-border consumption (Acar & Puntoni, 2016). "These acts can strengthen cultural exchange, but they also invite debates around appropriation and attribution. A recent example is the Prada Kolhapuri chappal conversation, which drew criticism for overlooking the Indian origin of the traditional footwear. Indian actress Kareena Kapoor added to the conversation by posting a story on Instagram saying, 'Sorry not Prada... but my OG Kolhapuri,' subtly calling out the lack of cultural credit (News9Live, 2025; Hindustan Times, 2025; Jin, 2018). Her public commentary, amplified by social media, reignited discourse on ownership and authenticity in global branding."

These cases illustrate that influencers shape more than consumer desire; they influence how meaning itself travels between cultures. As such, this study draws upon McCracken's (1989) Meaning Transfer Model to better understand how symbolic meaning moves through the digital ecosystem. It is especially useful in understanding how the same product can hold different meanings depending on who presents it and how it is visually framed.

Theoretical Framework

McCracken's (1989) Meaning Transfer Model offers a useful way to understand how cultural meaning moves through digital content especially on platforms like Instagram. The model outlines a process in which meaning shifts through three main stages: from cultural context to the influencer, from the influencer to the product, and finally, from the product to the consumer. In each step, symbols, values, and narratives are reshaped and reinterpreted.

In the Instagram ecosystem, influencers act as meaning-makers. Their posts aren't just visual; they're embedded with cultural cues drawn from personal identity, community context, and stylistic preference. Whether it's a short fashion reel, a beauty tutorial, or a lifestyle post, these creators weave meaning into how a product is seen. As a result, a brand's item can carry very different emotional weight depending on who presents it and how.

Take the example of the Kolhapuri-style chappal. When featured by Prada in a luxury collection, it becomes a symbol of global high fashion. But when the same design is worn by an Indian influencer who picked it up at a local market, the meaning shifts to heritage, authenticity, and even quiet resistance to commodification. The product hasn't changed; the cultural framing has.

That's where McCracken's model becomes especially relevant. It reminds us that meaning doesn't live inside a product. It travels through people, imagery, and social context. Influencers, in this case, aren't just stylists or endorsers. They're cultural translators who shape how value and identity are expressed across borders often in ways brands may not have anticipated.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Questions

- How do influencers blend cultural aesthetics with everyday storytelling to make global products feel local?
- What insights does McCracken's model offer in understanding how influencers create and transfer meaning through branded content?
- When global brands incorporate traditional designs, how do influencers shape whether the act is viewed as cultural appreciation or appropriation?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Understand how Instagram influencers use cultural visuals and storytelling to make global products feel personal and relatable to their audiences
- Explore how cultural meanings move through influencer content from tradition to trend using McCracken's Meaning Transfer Model as a reference
- Look at how influencers affect public ideas about authenticity, ownership, and identity, especially when cultural elements are reused or reimaged by global brands

This study takes a qualitative approach, using case-based analysis to trace how visual aesthetics move across cultures through influencer content. The data draws entirely from secondary sources including academic articles, online media, and social media posts from public accounts. Rather than measuring audience response with surveys, the focus is on close reading of visual narratives and cultural framing in influencer posts.

To ground the discussion, the paper looks at three real-world examples:

- Indian beauty influencers who popularised Korean skincare
- A European fashion influencer styling Indian textiles in a luxury context
- The Prada-Kolhapuri sandal moment and Kareena Kapoor's viral response

Scope of the Study

This paper takes a closer look at how Instagram influencers visually present culture not through metrics or data points, but by observing how aesthetics and storytelling affect how people perceive different cultures and products. The focus stays on interpretation rather than measurement. Instead of calculating reach, followers, or engagement, the study relies on cases drawn from what's already out there secondary research and widely available content from social platforms.

The discussion is shaped by three specific cultural settings:

- First, the way Indian beauty influencers have helped bring Korean skincare into mainstream popularity
- Second, how global fashion voices incorporate Indian textiles into modern looks.

- And third, the controversy around Prada's Kolhapuri-style sandals, which sparked an important conversation about appropriation and cultural credit especially when local voices and celebrities called it out.

Rather than claiming broad conclusions, the study aims to understand how meaning is created visually and how those visuals cross borders to influence perception and consumer behavior.

CASE STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

Each instance is analyzed using the visual content method, cultural impact, and meaning transmission. To better understand how these cultural patterns work in real life, the paper explores three distinct cases. Each one shows how Instagram influencers adapt global products to local settings, reframe traditional design into desirable digital content, or provoke dialogue around cultural recognition. Taken together, these examples reveal how influencers are becoming key voices in shaping global branding through cross-cultural storytelling.

Case 1: Korean Skincare and Indian Influencers

The integration of Korean skincare into Indian culture has been greatly aided by Indian beauty influencers such as Shreya Jain and Malvika Sitlani. Videos about Indian wedding functions, rainy season, or celebrations that use Korean products reflect international trends in ways that are appropriate for the local context. This visual integration transforms new routines into familiar habits and creates aspirational yet appealing content (Wang & Huang, 2022).

Case 2: Indian Aesthetics Used by Global Influencers

International influencers employ Indian aesthetics. Fashion influencers such as Tamara Kalinic have emphasized Indian art of embroidery, ornamental jewelry, and fabrics in their style videos, sometimes pairing them with upscale Western apparel. This situated Indian handcraft within the international luxury storytelling, increasing its value in non-Indian markets. By styling Indian elements in a contemporary, international context, they modify these looks from conventional to urban. (Michaelsen et al., 2022).

Case 3: The Prada - Kolhapuri Chappal Moment

A stir broke out online when Prada introduced a high-end sandal that closely resembled the traditional Kolhapuri chappal, a design rooted deeply in Indian culture. The price tag and lack of cultural credit triggered debate on social media. Indian actress Kareena Kapoor added to the buzz when she casually mentioned in an Instagram story that she picked up a similar pair locally in India. The moment wasn't just amusing, it raised deeper questions about cultural ownership and design credit. It also showed how public figures and influencers can challenge mainstream narratives and reinforce the value of local craftsmanship (News9Live, 2025; Hindustan Times, 2025).

FINDINGS FROM THE CASE STUDY

One of the clearest takeaways from the study is that influencers help reframe global products through a distinctly local lens. By pairing international trends with familiar cultural cues, they make products feel more relatable and desirable to local audiences. For instance, a handcrafted Indian necklace styled in a modern European fashion shoot, or a Korean sheet mask featured in a wedding prep reel for an Indian bride these aren't just mashups. They're forms of cultural storytelling that resonate with overlapping identities.

Another key insight is how influencers function as sociocultural bridges. They do more than spotlight what's in style; their content often blurs the line between what's seen as traditional and what's fashionable, or between streetwear and luxury. Through their posts, we see that cultural markers aren't fixed. Indian embroidery can sit next to Italian leather and still feel authentic.

They're opening up space for hybrid aesthetics to be embraced.

Perhaps most striking are moments when influencers shift from style guides to voices in cultural conversations. When Kareena Kapoor casually compared her affordable Kolhapuri chappals to Prada's luxury version, it sparked more than a fashion moment. It raised questions about originality, cultural credit, and the boundaries between homage and appropriation. These reactions show that influencers aren't just promoting looks, they're shaping which cultural stories are told, and who gets to tell them. All of this points to a larger truth: influencer content today doesn't just drive sales or trends. It shapes opinion, sparks cultural dialogue, and redefines how style, heritage, and global commerce interact. The real influence lies not just in branded partnerships, but in how these creators help people navigate identity in a globalised consumer landscape.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While not intended to be comprehensive, this study provides a targeted examination of how Instagram influencers employ cultural aesthetics to promote cross-border consumption.

The examples given are illustrative and do not necessarily reflect all influencing practices throughout the world. Primary interviews and analytics, which might provide more detail into the reactions of audiences or program outcomes, are not included in the present research because it is qualitative and dependent on secondary sources. Additionally, even if a lot of influencers work on a variety of digital platforms, the medium's focus is restricted to Instagram. Although the above choices were taken to maintain the study's strict focus, they provide various possibilities for further study.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The case examples suggest that influencers aren't just posting at random their aesthetic choices are quite intentional. What they show, how they style it, and where they're placing it all shape how people see a product's authenticity or cultural roots. With just one visual reel, an influencer can blend tradition and trend in a way that gives new meaning to familiar things.

In that sense, they're acting as cultural connectors. Some help make Korean beauty routines seem totally at home in Indian households. Others present Indian textiles in high-fashion Western contexts. A few even push back when global brands overlook cultural origins. They're part of a cultural shift, not just a marketing one.

So, what does this all mean? Instagram influencers are doing more than selling. They're reshaping how we think about culture, value, and identity in business. It might be worth asking in future research how algorithms influence which stories get seen or how one campaign is received in very different ways across borders.

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