



Research article

The #malayalambookstagram: Identity and Literacy in Shared Acts of Reading on Social Media

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Abstract

The paper analyzes select images from Instagram with the hashtag #malayalambookstagram. Reliant on the theory of visual grammar and social semiotic theories about selfies and hashtags, the study demonstrates that the hashtag is used with many images that do not represent books or reading. The hashtag is reanalyzed in social media to include other 'values' because the language name 'Malayalam' indexes the 'Malayali' linguistic identity and recontextualizes the book-related discourse to an identity-centric domain. The paper explores Malayali linguistic identity in connection with Kerala's achievements in social development and the community's attitude towards it. Literacy, reading and print culture, crucial to the formation and sustenance of Malayali subnationalism, have mediated the meanings ascribed to the linguistic identity. The paper concludes that the close relationship of Malayali identity with books and reading is vital for the recontextualization of book-reviewing discourse in social media to an identity-centric discourse.

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Introduction

Representations of reading in literature and visual art have often imparted the idea of a solitary reader, removed from sociality and disconnected from the surroundings. The reader is solitary and 'mentally elsewhere' in such representations (McLaughlin, 2015). However, reading in the digital age of social media has become a social activity that can form not only 'reading formations' (Bennett & Woollacott, 1987) such as online reading groups, but also 'ambient affiliation' (Zappavigna, 2014: 209; Zappavigna & Zhao, 2020: 207), in which profiles or personae in social media commune around specific 'values' without directly engaging or interacting with each other.

Hashtags in Instagram, a social media platform primarily associated with sharing of images and videos, such as #bookstagram or #amreading provide 'values' such as reading, books, and bookishness for users interested in those 'values' to commune around. These hashtags that offer an opportunity to share, curate, and exhibit reading practices have been interpreted and criticized to be conveying romanticized and gendered notions about reading that exclude and marginalize those outside a specific demographic and an identity (Thomas, 2021). While this is a case of an emergent identity, many hashtags explicitly mark a target audience, overtly mentioning categories and labels, resulting in indexically formed identities that draw from preexisting macro identities.

#malayalambookstagram is one among the many hashtags on Instagram in which a language name is inflected with bookstagram to mark a target audience of speakers of that language who are interested in book-related discourse. However, the paper argues that this hashtag results in a recontextualization (Bernstein, 1990: 215) of #bookstagram, expanding its meaning to potentially include any other 'values' that an ambiently formed subset of *Malayali* (primarily a linguistic identity, meaning speaker(s) of the language Malayalam) are interested in. The paper discusses certain aspects of Malayali identity and subnationalism that facilitates this process.

Reading and Reviewing

Reading is a fascinating human invention that requires neuronal recycling (Dehaene, 2009) or neuronal reuse (Anderson, 2014) from the perspective of neuroscience. There are perspectives that study reading as an embodied cognitive activity (McLaughlin, 2015) and a distributed activity as well. While these approaches towards the nature of reading are adopted as a preliminary, the paper is aligned with what reading does to individuals and social groups.

The general understanding is that reading enhances or at least affects thinking, helps us to experience and 'live' other lives, and connects us with others. Although the impact of reading has been academically explored, the studies have generally focused only on reading of fiction or imaginative literature and its impact on an individual reader (Miall & Kuiken, 2002; Usherwood & Toyne, 2002; Dodell-Feder & Tamir, 2018). These studies offer various perspectives on the effects of reading on an individual, including positive impacts on social cognition and self-transformation.

The positive aspects of reading have been discussed and celebrated throughout history. However, there have also been warnings against too much reading that it will make one "discursive and unsteady" (Seneca, ca. 63 AD, 2004). In the current era of hyper-extensive digital reading and fragmented reading, such warnings also remain relevant. However, what happens in social media

representations of reading and virtual shared acts of reading is ironically a celebration of physical, material books and their embodied reading. These representations, predominantly visual, are curated to depict a connection with nature. Because of the emphasis on physicality and materiality in a majority of such shared representations, an embodied perspective on reading is vital for analysis and interpretation of these social media book reviews or shared acts of reading.

The body of a reader learns, practices, and exhibits certain necessary physical skills and gestures in order to effectively read. This 'hexis' (Bourdieu, 2005: 48), an embodiment of 'habitus', will differ according to the material environment in which one reads, the device used for reading, its size, weight and so on, and the physical properties and peculiarities of the reader. These embodied habits manipulate the body, posture, grip, eye movement, and so on. These habits can also be affected by the material culture around reading, socioeconomic conditions, macro-historical changes, and technological advancements (McLaughlin, 2015: 14). Although virtual personae can potentially leave their body behind and engage without the sociocultural implications, Instagram is a space devoted to images and most online personae share images of themselves or images implying themselves, bringing the body back.

An important aspect regarding the representations of reading on social media is that they're often, but not always, reviews. With the advent of social media, the power to criticize or appreciate a cultural product has become freely available to ordinary cultural consumers who were restricted from participation and eschewed by media and cultural institutions from reviewing. These new-age non-institutionalized reviewers are a heterogeneous group with varying degrees of expertise, and the reviews are more dispersed and structurally diverse. The reviews embedded in the book-related discourse on Instagram are no different in their 'vernacularity' of lacking a form that is regulated or conventionalized (Jaakkola, 2019: 94).

Scholarly book reviews have common, recognizable characteristics such as outlining the book, highlighting certain parts, discussing of shortcomings, and recommending the book. This structure is observable across academic disciplines, and perhaps, even across various media such as newspapers, magazines, academic journals, and television. However, the structure and conventions of social media reviews are constantly growing and evolving in online communities through interaction. There are bookstagrammers who prefer to write a two-line assessment or a quote from the book and those who prefer to write long personalized essays. The use of emojis such as stars to give a 'rating' to the book is prevalent among some but eschewed by others. The diversity of online book reviews and studies of the evolving conventions of this virtual genre are not adopted as central themes in the paper. Nevertheless, when discussing and analyzing the chosen social media 'posts' containing images, the diversity and the 'vernacularity' will become apparent.

The paper explores the impact of reading and shared acts of reading on a community in the digital context of social media. The paper studies the diverse visual and verbal meanings of Instagram posts with the hashtag #malayalambookstagram. It is demonstrated that the hashtag is used not only with diverse kinds of book reviews and book discussions but also beyond the book-related discourse. Hence, a new perspective on the social impact of reading will be offered, studying reviews and other book-related content in social media around the linguistic identity of Malayali.

Reading and Body on Social Media

One of the iconic and most common things you can find on social media is a selfie. Zhao and Zappavigna (2017) distinguish a selfie from a traditional image on the basis of the lack of a direct perspective and discuss four types of selfies that do not have it. The presented selfie is an image mediated only by technology (generally, phone), and the mirrored selfie employs a mirror as well. Inferred and implied selfies are images where one cannot be sure about the conflation between the photographer and the visual participant. In these cases, either body parts of the photographer, like hands or objects, are used to imply the presence and perspective of a self. Additional cues can be found in the accompanying captions and tags as well. Reading-related discourse and tags in social media often employ implied and inferred selfies where books or book-related objects are used to implicate and construe perspectives. Books and other 'bookish' objects become an extension of the self and the body in these representations. I use the term 'bookish' in the sense used by Rodger (2019: 474) as a cover term for various aspects of material reality that surround, mimic, or symbolize books.

Visual representations of reading also have an embodied implication because of the possibility of evoking other sensory and sensual perceptions as well. The intersensory capability of books as both literature and as material objects gets represented via these images. For instance, Rodger (2019) notes that "shelfies" (images of bookshelves in social media) inspire not only reading but also a physical urge to see books in real, be surrounded by them, touch, smell, and feel them. These images also represent a subjective perspective towards books, the relationship the visual participant has with books, and the expression of their love towards books and 'bookish' objects. Hence, these images, especially on a platform like Instagram that primarily employs user-generated content, become personal, intimate, and a journal or record of life, although filtered.

Zappavigna and Zhao (2020), while discussing 'still life self-imagining' in social media, observe that there are three discourses happening. On the one hand, there is an autobiographic self-curation discourse that records one's reading like a digital multimodal diary. But there is also the discourse of an ambiently formed community and an aesthetic discourse. In the case of book-related images that are inferred/implied selfies, this is also applicable. The ambient formation is around 'values' related to books and reading and the aesthetic is a 'bookish' aesthetic. The self-curation discourse is intermingled with a discourse of reviewing books, resulting in descriptions of personal preferences of books and genres, evaluations based on such preferences, personal experiences of reading, and recommendations for the 'followers' and the ambiently affiliating others.

Instagram, a social networking site that was launched in 2010, rapidly rose to prominence and general popularity and also became a major platform for readers to connect with books; hashtags like #book and #bookstagram are frequently used, #bookstagram having 26 million entries at the end of 2018 (Jaakkola, 2019: 92). Although each post's text can have up to 2200 characters, a post seen in the feed shows only the first two lines. Hence, being a visual-centric medium, Instagram primarily uses images in book-related discourse. The paper argues that an identity is emerging in the discourse, drawing from visual, written, and semiotic resources. Such a perspective is adopted in this paper and the framework for studying identity in this manner, as a product of interaction and discourse, is largely adopted from Hall and Bucholtz (2005).

The study aligns with a pluralist view because a pluralist view is better suited to address the difference between Instagram as an image-centric platform and text-centric social media platform. It is also necessary to incorporate the role of secondary and tertiary publics and 'satellite counter publics', and to account for various emergences of multiple frames due to the colocation of hashtags (Rathnayake & Suthers, 2023). The ambiently formed community around #malayalambookstagram can be thought of as a satellite counter public of the public affiliating with #bookstagram. However, the hashtag is also often in colocation (accompanied by multiple other hashtags, including #bookstagram), resulting in a wide array of meaning possibilities. The focus of the study is the possibilities of meaning around the hashtag and how they come about; this results in renegotiations regarding the nature of publics formed by #malayalambookstagram.

Methodology

A qualitative analysis of purposely sampled images that use the #malayalambookstagram tag is attempted. The objective is to explore the visual and verbal meaning in these posts and to decipher how much they pattern with those of bookstagram. The analysis is reliant on perspectives regarding embodied reading and theories of social semiotics, which shed light on social media practices. It adopts ideas from the theory of visual grammar in Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), wherever required and applicable. These ideas are exercised with caution because Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) warn against adopting their system as a universal grammar. However, since social media users generally assume a global audience for their content and also because the dominant Western visual grammar is often layered with the local cultural, geographic, and environmental cues in these images, the theory of visual grammar is adopted as a general framework when reading images. When discussing identity in the latter part of the paper, sociolinguistic and pragmatic perspectives are employed. Discussion on Malayali identity and subnationalism draws from sociological, sociocultural, and developmental perspectives.

Images with #malayalambookstagram

Images uploaded by social media users that use the hashtag #malayalambookstagram can be broadly classified into three groups. Firstly, there are images that parallel the aesthetic of #bookstagram, and as noted by Thomas (2021), for #bookstagram images, evoke a connection with nature, calm, and serenity. Secondly, there are images that do not evoke such an aesthetic and focus on reading only as a mental process of engaging with ideas. These images that invoke the traditional understanding of reading communicate through captions and words rather than visual representation. These are either just book covers, i.e., without any setting or archival in nature, grouping many images of book covers and making a list based on some criterion. Thirdly, there are images that do not represent a book or reading directly and instead symbolize a culture that values books, reading, literary figures, and so on. These include visually represented quotes from books, quotes about literary figures, and also images that mimic a #bookstagram aesthetic without representing books or 'bookish' objects.



Figure 1: Stories of Ashitha

In many ways, the image given in Fig. 1 reflects the pattern of #bookstagram images. This image posted by the user 'reading_spectacles' is an implied selfie featuring the hand of the photographer, implying a subjective perspective and the photographer being the represented visual participant. The hand in the image marks reading as an embodied and intimate activity, while the plants and flowers that form the setting of the image evoke a connection with nature and the environment. Together, these elements invoke a sense of serenity and represent reading as a calm activity. However, unlike the dominant trend among #bookstagram images, the image is not gendered in a clear manner. Although the garden itself could be interpreted as a feminizing element, the half-revealed tattoo and the black watch do not reveal a specific gender identity and only make it more ambiguous. The hashtag #malayalambookstagram is prominently placed after the first few hashtags related to the author of the book and before the use of #bookstagram. The prominence given to #malayalambookstagram despite the collocation with #bookstagram suggests that the user is expecting an ambiently formed audience primarily interested in the book-related discourse in the Malayalam language. However, the collocation with #bookstagram and other book-related hashtags ensures that the post will receive a global bookstagram audience as well. The visual style of the image is, hence, conforming with the dominant bookstagram trend in some ways.



Figure 2: Days like jasmine flowers

The image in Fig. 2, posted by the user 'devarajanpraveena', does not clearly indicate or imply a photographer/visual participant self, although it can be inferred. A connection with nature and an 'in-nature' aesthetic are implied via the flowers that are in physical contact with the book, contrasted by a bleak background of sand. The title of the book means 'Days of jasmine-white', but the book cover features heavy and dark colors. The cohesion in the image matches the style and color of the book cover and not the color mentioned in the title of the book, endorsing the visual meaning of the book cover rather than the verbal.

It can be argued that the #malayalambookstagram serves two interpersonal functions in connection with this image. One is to attract those interested in books, reading, and their virtual shared acts, iterated by accompanying hashtags #booksofinstagram, #bookaholic, #bookaddict, and so on. The other is to attract 'Malayali' readers, speakers of the Malayalam language interested in the 'bookish' discourse, iterated by hashtags related to popular Malayalam literary figures such as #basheer, #padmarajan, and #madhavikkutty and Malayalam literary productions such as #khasakkinteithihasam. Hence, the accompanying hashtags, meant to increase "loudness" and "likelihood to be found" (Zappavigna, 2011), also reveal the attributes of an ambiently formed audience.



Figure 3: Malayalam Romance books

The image in Fig. 3 is only the first of ten different images that are posted together by the user called 'bookwormandherchild'. This image proclaims in verbal medium, through two different scripts and languages, that this is a 'list' or 'archive' of books related to love and romance, written in the language Malayalam, hence informing us of the other images in the post. Eight of the other images each contain pictures of two book covers against a plain, neutral background. The book covers, without any material setting, appear decontextualized and hence result in a 'classificational process' (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006), making a list of sixteen books related to love and romance in Malayalam. The last image uses only verbal medium and asks to 'comment' suggestions and 'follow' for recommendations. The image in Fig. 3 does not invoke nature, calmness, or even the materiality of books. Instead, it operates like a 'title,' naming its contents using verbal means and not visual. The contents, i.e., the other images in the post, are also two-dimensional book covers and not three-dimensional books.



Figure 4: Changampuzha Krishnapilla

The image in Fig. 4 features a pictorial representation of Changampuzha Krishnapilla, a renowned romantic poet in Malayalam literature. The written text in the image is a quote about the poet by M.N. Vijayan, a literary critic. The accompanying hashtags #changampuzha and #mnvijayan denote what the image is about, while #malayalamquotes classifies the kind of content. However, it is not straightforward what #malayalambookstagram does here other than merely increasing the “loudness” and searchability of talk. It could be argued that the poet’s drawn representation and by extension, the poet are part of a ‘bookish’ discourse. However, the ‘bookish’ discourse on social media involves visual representations of books or other material objects that imply a reading culture. In this image and other similar images that feature #malayalambookstagram, the materiality of books and reading is not represented, and on the contrary, fragments of the content of books, quotes, and the creators of the content, the literary figures are represented. In this sense, if at all books are represented by these images, it is synecdochical.



Figure 5: A scene from Chidambaram (1985)

The image in Fig. 5 is a still image, probably a screenshot, from the Malayalam movie Chidambaram (1985) by G. Aravindan. The image of a woman (played by Smita Patil) savoring the smell of roses is juxtaposed with a quote from Edvard Munch. Both the image and the quote represent a human participant and flowers but convey very different meanings. In this case, it is clear that #malayalambookstagram is not used to form an ambient community directly interested in books, book-related aesthetic, or reading. However, there appears to be artistic and literary content in this image that could arguably be of interest to a ‘reading community.’ G. Aravindan is credited as one of the filmmakers who pioneered a ‘parallel cinema’ of artistic merit in Malayalam.

It could be argued that the hashtag #malayalambookstagram symbolizes such 'values' of artistic merit and literariness in addition to books and reading. This raises more questions about the nature of #malayalambookstagram and the reasons for it being inclusive of such a wide variety of 'values.'



Figure 6: Solitary male musing

In Fig. 6, a human participant is observing nature at a railway station, perhaps while waiting for a train. The face and glance of the participant are not visible, but the positioning of his body provides a vector that suggests some phenomena, possibly outside the frame, that he is observing and reacting to. The aesthetic of the image with fallen flame-of-the-forest flowers, trees, greenery, and two distant human participants conveys a calm, serenity, connection with nature, and solitariness, much like #bookstagram images. Some hashtags used with the image are related to the location, such as #melatturrailwaystation, and some hashtags are classifiers implying the type of the post, like #naturephotography. The caption is a 'musing', possibly written by the user, that expresses a love for new places and sights. There is no book-related discourse in connection with the image in Fig. 6 and yet #malayalambookstagram is prominently placed after the hashtags related to location. In this case, the 'value' denoted appears to be a #bookstagram aesthetic, but the image is without a book or some other 'bookish' object. Hence, Fig. 6 demonstrates the potential of #malayalambookstagram to include values that do not match with a 'bookish' discourse. The question that remains to be explored is how this becomes possible and why.

What is #malayalambookstagram?

The analysis requires one to first consider the nature, morphology, and meaning of the hashtag #malayalambookstagram. Instagram is a visual social media that does not permit links external to the platform in the text box. This means that hashtags, one of the links internal to the platform,

become prominent devices for forming communities and increasing the reach of an individual post. Among the devices used for 'heteroglossia' (Bakhtin, 1981) in social media, hashtag stands out because it presupposes a virtual community of listeners (Zappavigna & Inwood, 2021). #bookstagram is a hashtag fusion of book and Instagram, which presupposes an audience interested in book-related discourse on the social media platform Instagram. #malayalambookstagram appears to be a compound word composed of the language name Malayalam and the fused word or hashtag that is 'bookstagram'. The question is regarding the relationship between these two parts. This relationship and its ambiguity are the keys to understanding the nature of ambiently formed communities around #malayalambookstagram.

The audience of #malayalambookstagram can be interested in a book-related discourse in Malayalam, of both Malayalam books and other language books. The audience can also be interested in a book-related discourse of Malayalam, only books written in Malayalam or those translated into Malayalam, but the discourse need not necessarily be conveyed through Malayalam at all times. The audience can be interested in a uniquely redefined Malayalam 'bookish' discourse that includes an interest in Malayali literary figures, their quotes, quotes about them, and so on. Lastly, the audience can also be interested in social media personae extending a #bookstagram aesthetic to Malayali lives, locations, environment, embodied experiences, and musings that can be monolingual or bilingual. Examples of all these possibilities have been discussed in the previous section. The argument is that these possibilities arise due to the different interactions between the two parts of the compound hashtag #malayalambookstagram.

The interactions between the parts of #malayalambookstagram and the new meanings that arise out of them happen through a process of recontextualization. Bernstein (1990) discusses 'recontextualization' as the process through which one discourse is embedded in another (158). When discussing hashtags that accompany multimodal texts in social media, Zappavigna and Zhao (2020) opine that sometimes a hashtag recontextualizes another. They discuss the case of #momlife accompanying #coffeeislife. It is pointed out that the images of coffee and #coffeeislife get recontextualized when used with the hashtag #momlife. This recontextualization is happening due to the collocation of two hashtags in which the discourse represented by one hashtag gets embedded in the discourse represented by the other.

In the case of #malayalambookstagram, I argue that this process happens within the compound hashtag in addition to its interaction with other accompanying hashtags. Books, 'bookish' elements, reading, and the book-related discourse are digitally recontextualized to a 'Malayali' domain. The ambiently formed community draws from the larger, traditional, linguistic community of Malayali subnationalism. This is the reason why the hashtag #malayalambookstagram is able to represent many 'values' such as 'love for Malayali literary figure X' or 'I am a Malayali and I am musing' in addition to the book-related discourse. In the next section, the relationship between Malayali identity and a book-related discourse is further explored to establish this argument and show how the nature (and self-perception) of Malayali identity facilitates this process of recontextualization.

Malayali: books, reading, and literacy

Malayali, the term used for speakers of the language Malayalam, is a linguistic identity in India, where the states were formed along linguistic lines. When discussing the Malayali identity, Devika (2007) notes the Malayali angst, before India's independence, of being subsumed by a larger linguistic community and culture in a 'southern' or 'west coast' state, resulting in movements that demanded a unified state for the Malayali people who speaks Malayalam. Although some of the advocates of this movement emphasized geographical and political unity, most gathered around the linguistic Malayali identity even when demanding a unified political entity.

Devika (2007) argues that there is a relationship between the Malayali identity and a desire for development. She argues that this 'developmentalism' is crucial in the conception of Malayali-ness and its relation to other states, mainly neighboring states and the Indian national state. On the other hand, Singh (2009) argues that the Malayali we-ness is the reason for the social development that has happened in Kerala. She argues that despite the ethnic and religious diversity, the people in Kerala feel as part of a group because of the prominence of Malayali subnationalism rooted in linguistic unity. She argues that this has helped the state attain levels of education and health far ahead of the Indian average and comparable with upper-middle-income countries. While observing and discussing the rise of Malayali subnationalism in the last decade of nineteenth century, Singh (2009) notes the significance of competition with a Non-Malayali Other (Tamil Brahmins) that unified various Malayali non-brahmin communities under an overarching linguistic identity of Malayali, although still keeping their different caste and religious affiliations. The ideas about a shared culture and language were used to strengthen this subjective sense of cohesion and close political competition in the later years also reinforced it and increased its impact on social development and welfare.

The interesting thing for the purpose of this paper is how both of these authors connect the Malayali identity with social development in the state of Kerala, although via very different arcs. Even if Malayali we-ness is prior to 'developmentalism,' it could be said that this phenomenon has fed back to the we-feeling and pride of the Malayali community. The achievements in literacy and education have become an integral part of the subjective sense of cohesion. Some of the phrases used in common parlance in Malayalam language such as '*Saakshara* Malayali' (literate) and '*Prabudha* Malayali' (enlightened/educated) also vouch for this connection or ascription. 'Values' such as enlightened, literate, and developed are ascribed to Malayali-ness as if there is a natural connection between the linguistic identity and these meanings.

The significance of a printing and reading culture in the formation of Malayali identity has been explored by Arunima (2006). She notes three processes in the nineteenth century that have contributed to the imagining of a Malayali community. One is the movement towards Malayalam as a liturgical language, mainly by Protestant missionaries, but also the Islamic religious writings in Arabi Malayalam and Malayalam and the printing of Ramayanam Kilippattu, one of the early literary/religious works in Malayalam based on the epic Ramayana, which sold 1 lakh copies by 1890. Secondly, Malayalam was adopted as a language of instruction in schools. Thirdly, it became the language of communication and expression through an emerging print culture that emphasized purifying and modernizing Malayalam by ridding it of Sanskritic impurities (Essays in magazines called *Vidyavinodini* and *Bhashaposhini*). Analyzing these three together, it can be said

that a print culture, books, and reading were crucial factors in the formation of a Malayali-ness and this is why such values are naturally ascribed to Malayali identity.

Ross (2006), comparing Kerala's achievements in literacy in the developing world to those of Finland among the developed countries, argues that there is a connection between literacy and the status of women. These interrelated achievements in social development owe much to reading and print culture. The early women's magazines in Malayalam, like *Keraliya Suguna Bodhini*, *Mahila*, *Vanitha Kusumam*, and others, were interested in the education of women and argued for the same, citing utilitarian, commonsensical, and mythological arguments (Antony, 2013). The articles often addressed this societal concern and developmental need in relation to the construction of an "ideal Malayali woman" and her duties to the family and the nation. Hence, one can observe strong links between Malayali-ness, reading, and literacy in the discourse related to women's education as well.

Harikrishnan (2023), arguing that private or confined spaces facilitated Namboothiri women to encounter alternate worldviews, presents an interesting example from Nilayamgode (2012), in which she recounts her experience as a young Namboothiri girl confined to a room during the time of menstruation due to the customs of purity and pollution. She recounts this confinement as a subversive space where the girls, she and her sisters, engaged in reading (and through reading, with the outer world), which was otherwise prohibited. However, it must be emphasized that it is reading, books, and a print culture that enable the private or confined spaces with such a subversive potential, which is why reading is ascribed with a 'progressive value' in the discourse around Malayali social development.

Based on opinions of subject-experts (on social spaces in Kerala) interviewed, Harikrishnan (2023) notes that the public sphere in Kerala is closely related to the vernacular language Malayalam and that libraries and reading rooms are some of the significant informal spaces. These observations, yet again links Malayali-ness, its formation and sustenance, with reading and spaces devoted to reading. This is how, by extension, the Malayali-ness itself gets ascribed with a 'progressive value'.

In summary, the discussion of various aspects of Malayali identity has revealed an intimate connection between this identity and book-related discourse. Values such as 'developmental' and 'progressive' are ascribed to Malayali-ness via the mediation of 'books', 'reading', and 'literacy'.

Conclusion: Malayali and #malayalambookstagram

The approach towards identity adopted in this paper is that it is a product of linguistic and semiotic practices (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). In this approach, along with the macro-level categories, temporary and interactionally derived roles are also considered significant. In the context of social media, it could be argued that the interactional derivation of roles and emergent cultural stances are minimized to an extent by labeling. The hashtags used with posts on Instagram not only create an audience ambiently but also provide a label to the post. These labels can be about the theme of the post, professions and roles of the participants, or their macro-level identities such as linguistic, national, religious, and so on.

In the case of #malayalambookstagram, a compound hashtag composed of a language name gets reanalysed because of the sociocultural discourse around the linguistic identity. The 'malayalam' part of the hashtag, the language name, acts as an identity category that indexes the tagged post as Malayali. Since the linguistic identity is closely interlinked with the book-related discourse in formation and sustenance, the book-related discourse is subsumed as a part of the identity and other 'values' related to Malayali-ness also get represented by the compound hashtag. This reanalysis is certainly happening in a bottom-up fashion and it is a product of interaction.

A question that arises at this point is whether similar phenomena can be observed with other book-related hashtags compounded with language names such as #frenchbookstagram or #germanbookstagram and whether the ascribed 'values' are different with those hashtags. A preliminary observation of images in Instagram showed that #frenchbookstagram and #germanbookstagram follow the same pattern as #bookstagram and do not encode any other 'values.' A previous study of hashtags that studied hashtags related to German book reviewing, such as #bookstagramgermany, #buch, and #rezension (review) notes that there were some posts advertising cups and candles in the data set obtained with the abovementioned hashtags (Stollfuß, 2023: 6). A specific number is not mentioned because the distinction made in the paper is between review-related posts and others, while these others include book-related posts without review-like content. Even if we take all these book-related non-review posts into consideration, the number is only 86 out of 514 (16.7 %) and the non-book related posts must be a much lower percentage.

This shows that similar phenomenon is not seen with other book-related hashtags composed of 'language names', which lends credence to the argument made in this paper connecting the phenomenon with the nature of Malayali identity. The question requires further exploration, just as the argument put forth in this paper. However, a challenge posed by macro-level quantitative analysis of such phenomenon is the enormous size of samples and to filter out data not relevant to the topic investigated. Micro analysis and qualitative analysis, on the other hand, helps us to observe the nuances of individual images, posts, and the hashtags used with them in an effectively evaluative manner.

The larger question implied by the argument in the paper, but entirely falls outside the scope of it, is whether similar phenomena happen with all kinds of hashtags in social media that involve an identity name. One of the reasons for the phenomenon explored in this paper, the change in meaning and 'values' of bookstagram in #malayalambookstagram, is certainly internal to the morphological composition of a hashtag and its compounded nature. This opens up the possibilities of exploring the meaning of hashtags beyond previous studies focusing on the collocation of hashtags.

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