Reading the "Exotic": Algorithmic Visibility and Representation of Digital Exoticism of Northeast India on Social Media

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Abstract: The present Northeast India has been under constant treatment of otherness without resorting to negativity, yet a certain indifferences come into play. By identifying the recurring discursive patterns through which the fascination with appearance predominantly coexists with stereotypes, misrecognition, and casual racism. The paper tries to argue that Indian media manifestations constitute the racialized discourses of 'Digital-Exoticism' of Northeast Indian as Otherness, meanwhile focusing on Identity and Northeast Indian raciality in the context of virtuality anddigital consumption.

Conducting an examination of the comments under memes, tweets, threads, and posts on online platforms such as Instagram, X (formerly known as Twitter), and Facebook between the years 2022-2025, the research analyzes how the representations of Northeast Indian bodies and their cultural markers are repeatedly framed as visually appealing, foreign, or "East Asian–like." While these representations often appear appreciative, it is clear that representations function asa forms of digital exoticism which reproduce more racial discrimination than social inclusion. Subsequently, the paper demonstrates how the social media user engagement and media platforms desensitize the marginalized history and political exclusion of the north-east Indian population through an aesthetically layered discourse, which is essentially a racialized circulation.

Using qualitative thematic analysis, the study has come to conclusion that social media not only reflects the existing attitudes but actively participates in shaping coerced formulation through which the mainland users extend the Northeast Indian identities to even beyond online socialcontexts. This theoretical framework traces the continuity between digital discourse and lived experiences of Northeast Indian identities. Furthermore, the paper debates on the racialisation, internally othering and the digital culture in contemporary India by highlighting the seemingly positive visibility. It also reinforces entrenched hierarchies transforming an admiration into a subtle but persistent mode of exclusion.

Keywords: *digital exoticism, Northeast India, racialisation, social media, internal othering*

Introduction

North East India has been a subject of numerous affirmations over the years, from being in the light of political activism, navigating through racial exclusion, to discrimination on social media. Studies have proven over the years how the identity of a significant part of India, that is, the North Eastern lands, find themselves continuously in systematic and erratic internalised racism. The digital landscape of India has witnessed this transformation gravely, more so after the rise of users in the digital space and their engagement growing more freely and without any developed surveillance. Jessie Daniels (2013) critiqued on a research on race and racism in the digital realm, identified social network sites (SNSs) as spaces "where race and racism play out in interesting, sometimes disturbing, ways" (Daniels 2013, 702). Subsequently, many scholars have expressed their observations on the increase in hate speech and racism online in countries like the US, Brazil, India, and the UK and the weaponization of digital platforms (Farkas et al. 2018). Concealment of identities under fake accounts incites racist hatred (Farkas et al. 2018), along with the crafty use of memes (Lamerichs et al. 2018). Social media plays a pivotal hand to influence the minds with "racist dynamics through their affordances, policies, algorithms and corporate decisions" (Matamoros-Fernández 2018, 933). The present study attempts to comprehend the modes of racist speech and identifies the new markers that constitute not as the conventional racist analogies. Evolving on the idea of Edward Said's Orientalism, scholars have noted that the Indian state's relationship with its northeastern frontier mimics the colonial binary of the "civilized" center and the "primitive" or "mystical" periphery.

While extensive scholarship exists on the racial violence against Northeast Indians in mainland cities (Haokip, 2021; McDuie-Ra, 2012), the new forms of racism on social media platforms are notably aestheticised. The discussion hence arises, does the comparison to "Korean pop idols," "Japanese chan," and addressing the people of Northeast India as "Oppa" plays as a medium of admiration or an aesthetic instrument of othering? Thongkholal Haokip (2021) remarked how the "Chinky" slur functions as a verbal border, keeping the Northeast Indian in a state of permanent "foreigner-ness." Sabik Pandit (2023) in *Identity through Subtraction* examines a cultural adaptation by the regional youth of North-East India into K-pop aesthetics to create a transnational identity. In an Instagram reel by user @sitasamnam posted on June 4, 2025, humorously expresses how the North-east Indians indeed like to be compared in the same hue as Koreans and Japanese. However, this study builds on Pandit by arguing that when mainlanders use these tropes (e.g., calling a Mizo creator an "Oppa"), it is a form of "Proximal Othering" (Bhabha, 1994). With this exploration, the research questions how social media algorithms facilitate the "packaging" of Northeast Indian identities into East Asian-aligned aesthetic categories. Consequently, probing forth the extension to which the "positive" digital visibility desensitizes the Indian public to the region's history of political exclusion and internal othering.

Individuals globally now act as both consumers and creators, as well as distributors, of information on social media. Many have taken on the role of reporting and offering commentary on important events. "Notably, Twitter has become a preferred platform for users seeking timely and current information" (F. Shwedeh, 2022). Many comments exaggerate their fondness towards the content creators, perhaps not with the intention of hatred per se, however, the language of constant juxtaposition does seem to portray in the real world.

The poignant aim of this paper was to determine whether this lens of transnational aestheticism remains an innocent admiration or an ornamented polemic tactic that conceals the internalised discrimination of North-east India. One of the advantages of a qualitative literature review is its flexibility in understanding and explaining complex phenomena, as it is not limited by numerical or statistical constraints. The data of comments on Instagram, X and Facebook from the years 2022-2025 was collected, and a thematic analysis was performed. Through "Close Reading" method of the comments, the study yielded that comments like "saranghe oppa," "chinki, "aapki skin literally Korean jesi h, glowing glowing," (your skin is literally like Korean, glowing, glowing) trigger the exoticist gaze.

The study employed Purposive and Theoretical Sampling (Patton, 2015). The data corpus consists of 20 high-engagement posts curated from 10 distinct Northeast Indian creators on Instagram. In these posts, I have thematically analyzed the language used by the commentors. The primary consideration is collecting the data across social media platforms, namely Instagram, X.com and Facebook. These creators were selected based on their "viral visibility" between 2022 and 2025, representing diverse niches including fashion (e.g., *SitaSmnam*), information and satire (e.g., *enim_lawriak*), and lifestyle (e.g., *Dimpu Baruah*). The discourse set down by the people engaging with North-eastern content creators is disturbing. A subsequent factor involves the gradual transformation of recognition by the users. Previously, the othering was quite transparent with slurs such as "Chinese," "Chinky," etc. and recently we notice a development as they are compared to "Koreans," "BTS," "K-pop," "Japanese," and many such things. Despite this transcendence, being identified as "Koreans" and "Japanese" is a positive identification. The paper enlightens the impact of social media racism and how it reinforces the mindsets of the consumers.

Social media and its critical engagement

Social media is a digital platform and application that allows users to create, share, and interact with content online (Ferine et al., 2023). The development of information technology revolutionized how people interact with each other that was previously limited by time and space (Maitri et al., 2023).

Naturally, this development has raised impactful questions about the influence of social media on social interaction in contemporary society (Ausat et al., 2023; Hall, 2018).

According to Danah Boyd (2015), the concept of social media does not refer only to the set of digital tools that enable new forms of sociability, nor to the tools that allow communication mediated by technological equipment. The interaction of the users on the platform is necessary for content creation and, by extension, build and affirm their identity. The world of social media is a platform of identity and information that people interact with on a daily basis. Social Media has evolved as a phenomenon that is identified as a poignant element in the critically changed the way people interact in this age, where information technology has a gripping dominance in our lives (Nabela & Rianto, 2020). The increasing influence of algorithms on information and content delivery, the awareness of internet users becomes an issue of agency, public life, and even democracy.

The psychological impact of social media serves as an exposing ground to idealized and curated portrayals of others' lives, often in a form of 'digital exoticism' in the presentation of the marginalized or "othered" cultures and thereby the development of profound feelings of inadequacy and a decline in subjective well-being (Nagata et al., 2024). The understanding and resolving of social media in this digital era also produce platforms where the framing of vulnerabilities of specific populations, public perception, and institutional responses are shaped. (Dhar et al., 2024). As such, the digital age acts as a sculptor of the modern psyche and how the users emerge out of social media realms with a biased and molded opinion towards certain groups and people.

As "race matters no less in cyberspace than it does 'IRL' (in real life)" (Kolko et al. 2000, 4). In a publication by the Society for Cultural Anthropology, a writer shared their experience, "...It haunts our identity and conditions our exclusion from membership in the Indian body-politic. It follows us like a shadow…," (Dolly Kikon, March 16, 2021). By aestheticizing the Northeast Indian subject, the mainland public creates a 'sanitized' version of the region that ignores its political fractiousness in favor of its visual 'affective capital.' The impact of such online interaction transcends down to the real world. "Migrants from Northeast India are accustomed to such routinized racial slurs that homogenize the diversity of their identity and belonging into a single category of racial difference predicated on a visual "otherness": sometimes "Nepali," sometimes "Chinky." Social Media is no different, and provides no space pardoning the 'different' that have been deemed fit by certain groups.

When Black women are aestheticized in contrast to the Eurocentric norms, the fascination falls into anti-racism racism. In a discussion by Danatzis, Ilias, et al. , the study demonstrates how in China the promotion of "white, thin, youthful" standards of beauty leads to internal physical exclusion based of appearance. Similarly, the Latin women are often referred to as "exotic spice," which reduces them

to physical traits and bars substantive discourse. These labels might be expressed in lieu of appreciation, although the outcome on the real people in their real lives is affected immensely.

Enduring such constant pressure of the aesthetic standards, the subjects gradually develop deep psychological stress followed by an identity crisis. They are unable to produce positive evaluations of their appearance and body. Fetishized praise can hence cause the upcoming youth of North East India, who are already a grappling part of Social Media. In 2024, Hoilenchong Chongloi (username @the_cook_who_lifts) posted a reel where many mainlanders asked to be photographed with her under the impression that she is in fact Chinese. The caption on the post read, "Small Eyes Problems." Instances such as these render us to think whether the captivating allure the other part of India has for the North East is not an embellished form of racism, a process of othering.

The practice of such ideas is constructed racially in the real world, stemming from the online world. Despite being critically diverse, India has constantly been segmented into a trident situation, namely, the south, the north, and the northeast. Under such a division, which has been a product of internal boundaries, the treatment of the people from the North-East falls in the category where they are not even considered Indians. On platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and X.Com, the comments have evolved from 2022-2025 with an ornamented form of Othering. One of the influential characteristics of racism is denial, which when performed in its subtle indirect discourse leads to two sorts of diversions to binary racism and non-racism systematically reducing the complex, historical nature of racism (Kendi, 2019.)

The study develops Edward Said's Orientalism as the idea that has now propagated in different forms through Social Media. In a review by Bodhisattva Kar on the works by Sanjib Baruah, he writes, "... *Baruah fleetingly pointed at the resonance in the structure of governance between several postcolonial African states and Northeast India. In the opening chapter he now elaborates his case with force and flair, unhesitatingly identifying the colonially derived style of administration in Northeast India as "indirect rule", an established category in the history of colonial Africa."* (Baruah, S., 2021). The supremacy of the Colonialist White has transformed into a digital persona in India with the "Othering" of North-Easterns as "Koreans," "Chinese" and "Japanese." Subtracting them of an identity that makes them of the very nation they belong.

The Embellished Othering and Digital Exoticism.

In the *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, Jean-François Staszak explicitly defines exoticism within the framework of othering. In his glossary, he elucidates the relation of exoticism and othering. He presents exoticism as "a taste for exotic objects/places/people" and Othering as "transforming a difference into otherness so as to create an in-group and an out-group" (Elsevier, 2008). The words used in correspondence with someone often defines their persona in our minds.

Pillaring on this social dynamic, we create a lens through which we view the lives of particular individuals, group and a community, even. As "othering can be realized in various forms: exoticizing, homogenizing, and romanticizing," (Lee, Chee Hye, 2023), the fact that a community is 'embellished' through misguided representation leads to racism in disguise.

The embellishment of Othering is not majorly done with the preconception of racism, although the subsequent repercussion of the action thus indeed lead to the distinction of groups. North east India has been homogenized under an umbrella of "othered" group and we have failed to include them in the necessary sense of being Indians in real life and on Social Media. Being constantly hauled as the citizens of other nations creates a drift that might cause irrevocable existential dilemmas. "The aestheticizing perception of the Other, people-objects-places different from subjectively familiar reference systems" (Berdychevsky, Liza, 2023). The main problem arises when "the exotic Other in the dichotomy of 'us-here-now' versus 'them-elsewhere-erstwhile' is often romanticized and/or demonized" and this "often contributes to ethnocentric stereotypes, simplistic overgeneralizations, asymmetry of power relationships, and commodification" (Berdychevsky, Liza, 2023). On an X post by @Nagaland_India published on 18th December 2025, addressing the issue of mainlanders associating North-east Indians as "Koreans" and "Chinese," a user remarked, "so called 'white Indians' especially NE India…" speaks to the underlying segregation that is deep instilled in the people. Internet provides the platform to engage on an open manner and express our sentiments in a fairly unrestricted discourse which can entail the interaction more unfiltered and without civilized boundaries among the pros.

Merenla Imsong is a famous Content Creator on Instagram from Nagaland, India. According to Google AI, she is an actor and writer as well, featuring in various movies and shows such as, *Axone* (2019), *Call My Agent: Bollywood* (2021), *Patal Lok* (2020), *The Knot* (2019), etc. On Instagram she is a known persona with around 148K followers. With a long run on social media platforms, she has posted over 1500+ posts across Instagram and Facebook. A comment under a reel dated 16th February, 2022, was posted, "Who are you, and who gives you the right to judge Indian people?" The intention of the user was clear from the language they used, exuding the otherness they feel entitled to since she is a Naga creator. It is critical to observe the way ideas and thinking corresponds in real life from social media as "social media may facilitate an easy and rapid reproduction of Orientalist representations" and "this reproduction reinforces the Western colonial mentality" (Sozen Basturk, 2025).

In 2023, I was at my university in Varanasi. On the Republic Day, my friends and I were visiting the new Vishwanath Temple inside the Banaras Hindu University Campus. Usually, the place celebrates the diversity of worshippers visiting the temple. A woman sitting outside the temple, minding her own business was approached by another tourist. He blatantly asked her (if she was) "BTS?" repeatedly until she became overtly uncomfortable and politely asked him to leave her alone. The man insisted that she clicked a photo with him as he has never met a "Korean, BTS" woman in his

life. Upon incessant intrusion, the woman snapped and curtly remarked that she was Indian and she would appreciate being left alone. At this point, my friends and I intervened and brusquely asked the tourist to count his way. This incident was not a rare occurrence. North-east Indians undergo such encounters perhaps more often than normal.

Duncan McDuie-Ra documented that "exotic facial features are accentuated by exotic attire. In certain restaurants and spas, women wore incheongsams, the form-fitting Chinese evening gown. In some cases, exotica is more important than focusing on body shape, while in others, they dress in East Asian pastiches. I have seen Naga waitresses in more upscale Korean restaurants wearing hanbok, a flowing traditional garment that hides the figure. Zana, a 23-year-old male migrant from Nagaland, claims that "for Indians it is like going to Bangkok for shopping." We all look the same, but some of us speak Hindi," (Duncan, 2013).

As the aim of this study also projects that digital exoticism is not limited to digital platforms, it occurs to real people in the real world. It might be possible that some people do not associate being called as "Koreans" or "Japanese" as a necessitated form of racism, yet in the real world in negatively impacts the lives of North-east Indians. Due to rise of K-Dramas, Anime, and south-east Asian content on digital media post pandemic on Netflix and other OTT platforms (Jin, Lee, and Hong, 2023), the connection drawn between Koreans and North-east Indians are seen through rose-colored glasses. Nonetheless, this homogenization of North-east Indians is a form of embellished othering. Rai (2022) argues that 'race' in India is a postcolonial-neoliberal construct, whereby colonial 'Mongoloid' is reconstructed into neoliberal 'Northeastern', such that 'race' in India acts as a layered mode of constructing identity and difference. "The 'Northeastern' category emerges as a result of exclusion from the 'Indian' category, which itself is racialized along Hinduised-Aryanised lines" (Rai & Campion, 2022). These discriminations are overt acts of racial prejudice that primarily stem from the nonrecognition or misrecognition of Northeast Indians, who are mainly mongoloid race, as Indians. "The fight by Northeast Indians was not only against the presumption of being 'non-Indian' with negative affiliation, but also to get due recognition and acceptance as equal Indians" (Haokip, T., 2021).

Robbing someone of their identity through societally aesthetic standards doesn't refrain from the fundamental division of it all. Some creators are of the belief that being compared to "Koreans" is better than being called "Chinese." "A North-East Indian girl is respected more if is identified as a South Korean or Japanese, but the problems begin when she says she is a North-East Indian," (Biswas, A., 2025). In an Instagram post by @emin_lawriak (10th December, 2024) numerous users have commented, "Really you are looking the aura farmer of Korea:- Sung Jinwoo." Under the same photograph, another comment read, "Bro you are Indian? Really?" and "Kdrama core." Multiple

comments have been uploaded sharing the similar sentiment of comparing them to a specific Korean actor or from the Korean entertainment industry in general.

Many creators and influencers have raised the concerns of digital othering through their content on Instagram, X and Facebook. A travel vlogger on Facebook with the username, @NitinVlogs have posted numerous posts travelling and enlightening the audience of the unexplored or under explored places of India. The years 2024 and 2025 of his Facebook wall focuses predominantly on the North-east segment of India, traversing through Nagaland, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. He interacted with the different tribes, noting the nuances and purity of their culture untainted by any separatist sentiment. However, they have shared their first-hand experiences on being called as "Chinese," "BTS," and "Chinky," to name the few. In a reel posted in January 2025, Nitin uploaded a reel featuring the different varieties of meats and other food items sold at the local market and the comments were horrifying to say the least. "Nagaland people don't like Hindu," "They eat meat of trusted animals, can't trust these people," "They are not Indians," and many more equally racist (The comments have been translated to English).

Social Media Influencer Dione Nonang from Pasighat shared publicly reels on being bullied for being a Trans person from Arunachal Pradesh. They have suffered from online harassment on double layer, first for being a member of the LGBTQ+ community and for belonging from North-east India. Personal encounters such as these reflect the unfiltered handling of the social media community where some users feel they can get away with wounding cruelty hiding behind a digital veil. When people are online, they often open up more or behave in ways they wouldn't in face-to-face settings. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as the "online disinhibition effect," (Suler J, 2004) is explained through the interaction of six key factors: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and the minimization of authority (Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7 (3), 321-326.)

The rise of digital interaction has found its way through a lot of phases. During the intial days, people used to be candid with their opinions online. As the evolution of social media and regulations evolved over the years, forthcoming exposure to thoughts has been crafty in nature. Despite the rules and monitoring reports every now and then on social media platforms, the phases of Othering transform fortnightly. There are many issues that are propagated and normalized through social media platforms. A vlogger @Neha Gurung from Northeast India has been constantly posting on Twitter and now, X, since 2015. In an upload, dated 16th March 2025, she posted a short video on how the mainlanders perceive the North-eastern terrain of India. The comments were in a state of complete disarray. Starting from, "You look like a Korean girl," to another, "Northeast part of India hates India," and lastly, "Indians have faced racism in Nagaland too." The internalized racism exists in parts of

northeastern states as well and that is in no way shape or form acceptable. However, the bifurcation has fueled racism and exotic othering which reflects in the lives of people living all over India.

Conclusion

Racism has worn different clothes throughout its evolution and current literature has recorded this to the best of its abilities. Scholars have noted the subtleties through which the mechanics of racism have function and how it has affected the lives of the people. Throughout history, we also bear examples of how even the people propagating racist ideas aren't truly aware of the extent of the affect their words cause, and this is the reason this study was needed to highlight the various forms of literature that harm the very livelihood of the recipients, mentally, physically, socially and economically. Each incident that happens to these people are a flagbearer to how many colors racism can clad as the years go by.

The aim of my research concluded the transference of racism and "othering" from social media to the real lives in form of digital exoticism. The incident that I recorded from 2023 bears a key understanding to my choice of this study and hence proves without a doubt how social media has influenced the lives of people belong from the beautiful states of the north-eastern parts of India. According to my analysis, this research has demonstrated that the historical "Othering" of Northeast Indians has not disappeared, rather, it has been reformed into a lens of Digital Exoticism. By thematically understanding the shift from overt slurs like "Chinky" to seemingly appreciative labels such as "Oppa," "BTS," or "Korean-like," I have put forth a deduction that considers aesthetic admiration an embellished form of racialization. While mainland users may perceive these comparisons as positive, they effectively function as a "verbal border" that continues to deny Northeast Indians their right to a distinct, indigenous identity within the Indian body-politic.

By manually analysing each and every comment that have been taken into account for this study, the study concludes that social media algorithms and the "online disinhibition effect" have accelerated this "Proximal Othering." Furthermore, by framing Northeast Indian bodies as transnational "East Asian" icons, digital culture desensitizes the public to the region's history of political exclusion and systemic marginalization. This aesthetic layered discourse creates a "social fit" that prizes visual "affective capital" over genuine social inclusion. As evidenced by the real-world encounters documented in this paper—from personal experiences to the fetishization of service workers—the digital veil does not contain the harm, it actually amplifies it, in the manner of persisting a mode of exclusion

"Digital Exoticism" is a neoliberal construct that commodifies the Northeast Indian identity while maintaining deep-seated hierarchies. True inclusion cannot be achieved through the "rose-colored glasses" of K-drama tropes or the homogenization of diverse tribal identities into a "white Indian" or "East Asian" pastiche. To move beyond this embellished othering, there must be a conscious

effort by both platform moderators and the general public to recognize Northeast Indians as equal citizens, rather than aesthetic objects. Only by dismantling this digital exoticist gaze can we begin to address the internalized racism that continues to haunt the contemporary Indian psyche.

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