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Social And Cultural Change In The Age Of Internet Fame; A Qualitative Study Of The Fame Economy Among Iranian Influencers

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Abstract

In contemporary society, the culture of fame and its underlying social structures have been fundamentally reshaped by the cultural industries and new media, generating novel cycles of economic activity and revenue for well-known and influential individuals. This study aims to explore the social and cultural transformations of the fame economy within Instagram—currently the most widely used and influential social media platform in Iran, with over 31 million active users. Specifically, it examines how Iranian influencers capitalize on internet-driven fame and convert it into economic opportunities. Using a qualitative research design and thematic analysis, the study investigates the Instagram content of 30 prominent influencers, each with between 100,000 and 600,000 followers, selected based on user recognition across 12 distinct categories of activity, according to Lampert's method. The analysis identifies and categorizes diverse strategies these influencers use to engage with the fame economy. The findings reveal that social and cultural changes driven by internet fame have not only reshaped social stratification but have also prompted influencers to move away from traditional modes of monetizing celebrity. Instead, they are innovating new forms of economic engagement that empower them in entrepreneurship, personal and commercial branding, and the development of networked movements. These processes contribute to the global circulation of localized cultures and norms. Unlike previous fame paradigms, the contemporary fame economy is distinctly personalized and economically driven, emphasizing monetization over influence or role-modeling alone.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

In recent decades, fame has evolved from a merely symbolic and social condition into a complex phenomenon with cultural, communicative, and economic dimensions. With the rise of social networks and the transformation of digital technologies, the traditional structure of fame production and distribution has shifted, giving rise to new actors such as influencers—micro-celebrities who wield considerable influence across various domains. By utilizing platform mechanisms such as Instagram, influencers represent everyday life, promote consumer lifestyles, and establish quasi-social relationships with audiences, thereby becoming cultural and economic reference points. In Iran, this process has coincided with the erosion of traditional sources of legitimacy, leading to the emergence of a new social class that acquires symbolic and economic capital through visibility and personal branding. This study aims to provide a sociocultural analysis of this phenomenon by examining the mechanisms through which this class is formed, the fame-based practices they engage in, and the economic strategies employed by Iranian influencers. The objective is to present a clear picture of the implications of this transformation in the structure of power and culture in contemporary Iranian society.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach and employs thematic analysis to investigate the strategies used by Iranian influencers to capitalize on the fame economy within the context of social media. The data were collected through content analysis of the Instagram pages of 30 well-known influencers, selected with input from users and ranging between 100,000 and 600,000 followers. These individuals represent 12 different activity categories and were chosen based on theoretical sampling and the Lampert method. Data analysis was conducted at three levels: description, explanation and interpretation, and synthesis and conclusion. The research process was guided by the study's theoretical framework. The thematic analysis followed the model of Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2022), and using an advanced inductive approach, it aimed to go beyond content enumeration to explore explicit and implicit ideas, key themes, and the influencers' modes of agency within the attention economy.

Results And Discussion

The findings indicate that emerging internet celebrities—particularly those active on Instagram—primarily originate from middle-class backgrounds and gradually gain influence in media and cultural spaces by showcasing their daily lives, lifestyles, and individual identities. The content analysis of the Instagram pages of 30 active Iranian influencers across 12 fields revealed four main revenue-generation patterns within the fame economy: pure commercial advertising, advertising through content creation, product sales based on personal branding, and the development of independent commercial brands. This categorization, based on the themes derived from data analysis, shows that higher levels of individual agency, creativity, and expertise correspond with increased complexity and sustainability in revenue models. A significant portion of the influencers studied have moved beyond simple advertising to more advanced stages, such as brand development and the establishment of independent businesses. This shift highlights a transformation in patterns of agency and cultural consumption in the digital sphere. The results of this study demonstrate that the fame economy in Iran, much like in other societies, has undergone fundamental changes in which the boundaries between personal actions, private life, advertising, and business have become increasingly blurred. The traditional fame model—dependent on institutional support—has been replaced by a more individualistic and interactive system, where influencers generate social and economic capital through communication skills, media creativity, and personal branding.