

Social media capital: Future trends in Meghalaya

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Meghalaya, in today's age, has seen a significant increase in social media usage. This has been widely accelerated during the pandemic. Social media is no longer just a tool for socialisation but has embedded itself into various aspects of human life (education, politics, economics). In the case of Shillong, social media activity and engagement have flourished, and individuals are constantly producing and distributing content on multiple platforms.

The Rapid Rise of Social Media

The rise of social media has led researchers to label the current economy as the “attention economy”. The attention economy is dependent on transforming online attention and online (social) capital into monetary gains. It is commendable to see the youths tap into this emerging industry within the confines of the Shillong Urban Agglomeration. This has led to an emerging online entertainment industry on platforms such as YouTube and Instagram for local content creators. However, not everyone who aspires to become an ‘internet celebrity, ‘influencer’ or ‘content creator’ can succeed. Online presence and self-branding are instrumental to capturing attention online. ‘Attention’ as a concept is highly subjective, and individuals differ profoundly in personal interests, values, beliefs, likes and dislikes.

Although various positives emerge from social media usage in terms of alternative livelihood opportunities, individuals must remain critical of social media and its relationship with development and employment. Recently, an advertisement in the state for the position of ‘project fellow’ and ‘project associate’ required individuals to ‘shoot a video demonstrating why they were the right candidate; thereafter, individuals were required to post the video on Facebook and Instagram’. The above instance is a PRIME example of how social media has seeped into employment spaces. Similarities can be drawn between the application process and the operations of brand influencers on social media. Both rely on acquiring enough social media capital to secure a paid partnership.

Individuals in the state have different relationships with technology, and the digital divide is multifaceted. The digital divide is not only simply determined by ‘access’ in terms of the haves and the have-nots. Multiple inequities exist within access to digital technology, and often structural offline inequities are carried over to the online world. The idea of equating value to social media presence and online capital is capitalistic and follows a neoliberal philosophy which is dictated by market forces. This discredits other skill sets such as critical thinking, community building and bottom-up knowledge production and obsesses over self-presentation, branding and visual aesthetics. The trend of viewing social media content with wide viewership as the ‘social’ norm stems from the collective

illusion that social media generates. People will have to be critical of the success of these projects and must not solely rely on what is curated on social media. Social media is not always a projection of social or economic reality and the 'success stories of certain government initiatives are not always replicable on a large scale. As projects begin to recruit individuals with a strong social media presence; citizens will have to be wary of this trend as this could lead to meshing governance with digital entertainment.

The Immediate Future

The current government has prioritised investing heavily in the visual affordances of social media. This reliance on visual culture can often create an illusion of change and progress. With the state elections coming in 2023, it will be interesting to see if politicians tap into the skill sets of content creators and influencers as a means of strengthening their online presence to grasp the attention of voters through visual optics. Hence, citizens will need to critically evaluate progress through the 'offline' rather than depending on 'online' mirages.

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