

# A Study of Cultural Dilution and Influencer Advertising in Samit Basu's 'Chosen Spirits'

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## Abstract

The rapid growth of cultural consumption has led to a nearly seamless generation of hyperrealities. This generation is accentuated through the swift and inundated barrage of advertisements that have permeated all modes of expression in mainstream media. This article explores cultural dilution in the context of the convergence of art, advertising, and hyperrealities. Drawing on a textual analysis of Samit Basu's novel 'Chosen Spirits' (2020), Baudrillard's notions of hyperreality espoused in 'Simulacra and Simulation' (1994), and a close study of influencer advertising and its effects, this study dissects the intricate relationship between art and commerce and its subsequent implications for cultural significance. The paper argues that blending art and advertising creates a continuous flow of hyperrealities, eventually diluting the represented culture. This process leads to the convergence of the once distinct realms of art, culture, and commerce, wherein culture becomes a consumable object. Advertising leeches, dilutes, and duplicates significant elements from its source, further blurring the boundaries between the two domains. The symbiotic relationship between advertising, culture and consumption is catalysed by technology. Consequently, the gormandised culture's value diminishes, and the communication gap between producers and consumers widens. In addition to transforming the nature of artistic expression, it impacts the authenticity and integrity of cultural production. The complex dynamics that shape contemporary cultural landscapes are unveiled by analysing how advertising and hyperrealities intertwine with art and culture. This subsequently invites critical reflection upon the implications of cultural dilution, the commodification of art, and the role of technology in reshaping cultural identities.

**Keywords:** hyperreality, simulation, influencers, advertising, media, culture

## 1. Introduction

Samit Basu's 'Chosen Spirits' (2020) occurs in a futuristic Delhi plagued with riots and water scarcity. People have grown accustomed to communal and public violence. Every housing colony has its private army. People's lives are intertwined with the internet, social media, and broadcasting their lives through 'Flows'. This amalgamation of the individual and social media is so thorough that cultural rituals and rites of passage have lost the little sanctity they had left. This becomes evident during Rajat Gupta's funeral, one of Delhi's earliest social media influencers. At the funeral, numerous people, including the deceased's wife and relatives, 'flowing' (Basu's term for 'live-streaming') the entire ceremony (Basu, 2020).

While a common trope among SFF texts is to set a stage for a grand scale of events, Basu focuses on the culture surrounding influencers, the intense rivalries, instances of sabotage, corporate espionage, and the ruthless predatory way corporations prey on content creators.

Basu uses the lives of influencers as a backdrop to gloss over various issues that he believes will exist in a futuristic Indian society. Rampant consumerism, collective disillusionment, casteism, people's obsession with the lives of celebrities, addiction to social media, the gradual regression of individual privacy through automated surveillance, the travails of existing in an oligarchy, and the augmentation of technology with the human body.

While from the outset, the events and setting of 'Chosen Spirits' (2020) might seem dystopian, Basu has asserted that the novel is not a dystopian text but a best-case scenario (Basu, 2020). He takes an anti-dystopian stance through Zaria Salam's assertion that a dystopia is pornographic. While Zaria initially opines that it is 'fun', it causes people to lean towards apathy in the long run, as it puts some distance between the audience and the events described in the text (Basu, 2020).

While the text adheres to dystopian archetypes such as a totalitarian government lording over a surveillance state. This society seems moments away from collapsing, a population faced with climate-related catastrophes, a general atmosphere of apathy, decadence of the elite, secret societies, and overall loss of individualism are present; the novel seems to edge towards a futuristic perspective by presciently narrating what would come to pass.

This aspect of prescience enables the text to be placed alongside texts with futurist connotations like Aldous Huxley's 'Brave New World' (1932) or Alvin Toffler's 'Powershift' (1990). Even Joey's vocation, namely a reality controller, involves constant monitoring of trends,

developing scenarios, and envisioning a future through them, similar to what a futurist does. Comparatively, Joey uses her findings to optimise Indi's content rather than limiting herself to theorising and prediction. One aspect of 'Chosen Spirits'(2020) is reminiscent of Wallace's 'Infinite Jest'(2006), particularly when corporate companies use national monuments like the Taj Mahal for advertising and sponsorship (Basu, 2020). Similarly, in 'Infinite Jest', calendar years are not denoted using traditional Arabic numerals but using the names of products, such as "Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar" (Wallace, 2006).

The text forecasts the political climate, the future's zeitgeist, and the pitfalls awaiting people in a totalitarian surveillance state. On the other hand, it also offers the reader a panoramic view of Indian society and how modern elements like technology and social media play into a culture that emphasises tradition and conventional moral values.

Through the trials and tribulations of Joey and Rudra, it also becomes a novel about trying to belong in a country without much room to belong. The text offers a relatively objective view of Indian polity by critiquing the Right's obsession with the past and the Left's obsession with being politically correct while simultaneously being powerless to do much else. To quote Thomas Pynchon from the epilogue of 'V'(1995)

"The Right can only live and work hermetically, in the hothouse of the past, while outside the Left prosecute their affairs by manipulated mob violence. And cannot live but in the dreamscape of the future." (Pynchon, 1995).

### *1.1 Review of Literature*

French structuralist philosopher Jean Baudrillard has been the subject of constant critique, chiefly owing to his interpretation of the consumption of culture. His interpretations are often labelled as cataclysmal or embittered due to the bleak outlook and insights he provided into the ontological and epistemological roots of how culture is consumed in society. This is explicit in his seminal work of postmodern philosophy, 'Simulacra and Simulation' published in 1981. However, the genesis of Baudrillard's theoretical edifice can be traced back to his notions expressed in 'The System of Objects' (2006). He methodically analyses the relationship between people and objects in a consumerist society in that text(Baudrillard, 2006).

While Baudrillard's notions on the disintegration of reality into seamless multitudes of copies are intriguing and disruptive from a theoretical standpoint, some confer a high level of nihilism over his ideas. Apart from that, he displays a deeply rooted scorn for contemporary technology and is seemingly unable to surpass his romantic predilections over the loss of the real, the natural, and the human—however, the criticism surrounding Baudrillard's notions swings between high praise and direct condemnation. Anne Marie Willis has posited that his works can be regarded as nothing more than a string of aphorisms unworthy of being engaged critically (Willis, 1997). In the end, Baudrillard can be placed as a theorist who tested the boundaries of postmodernism by tracing the origin of signs and the impact of technology on contemporary life while simultaneously criticising his contemporaries' modes of thought and developing new philosophical perspectives.

In that regard, Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal can be placed inside Samit Basu's 'Chosen Spirits'(2020) to elicit the workings of a quasi-futuristic society whose denizens are rooted in the voracious assimilation and consumption of information through the internet and social media. Mark Nunes (1995) has analysed the place of Baudrillard's postmodern notions by placing them in the context of cyberspace and virtuality in tandem. Although Nunes states that Baudrillard makes no direct references to the internet or networks that span the circumference of the globe, his opinions on telematics and the consumerist nature of contemporary society provide an epistemological foundation for understanding the metaphysical nature of a presence as universal as the internet. Nunes views the internet through a Baudrillardian lens and ascertains it as a cybernetic terrain that constantly undermines the allusive relationship between the metaphoric and the real (Nunes, 1995).

On the other hand, Thiry-Cheques and Hermano (2010) explore the economy and consumption in contemporary semiurgic society through Baudrillardian notions. During the transition from an industrial society to a symbolic society, the locus of work culture also underwent a metamorphosis in tandem, where it shifted focus to competition and personalisation. They further espouse that this personalisation aspect generated an illusion of originality and the act of exercising a person's personal choice. They expand on Baudrillard's notions, particularly related to how the value of an object is supplied through advertising. He calls it a seduction scheme, where the worker is not a victim but an active participant in the system's machinations. Similarly, Nunes espouses that the internet offers debauchery and mitigations about postmodern life (Nunes, 1995).

More recently, Barroso (2019) explored the validity of the virtual world and the role of signs and structures in fostering people's perception of the world. In particular, his inquiry is directed towards the metamorphosis produced by hyperreality, particularly regarding social life, independence, and interpretation of reality. Finally, Wolny (2019) makes a similar exploration by combining Lyotard's opinions on postmodernism expressed in 'The Postmodern Condition'(1984) and Baudrillard's views on consumerism and hyperreality.

This gradual undermining has many corollary effects, including the glacial dilution of culture. This dilution is accentuated through influencers' advertising and promotional practices on social media. The rapid growth of social media enables companies to recruit influencers with sway over their online audience. Gräve (2017) analyses the public perception of influencers and whether they will displace traditional celebrities like musicians and actors regarding endorsements and product placements. Additionally, Gräve (2017) also analyses the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements through surveys. At the same time, he concludes that the endorsers must choose the appropriate endorsee and manner of propagation to maximise the reach of their campaign. However, Gräve (2017) adds that further

research is required, particularly concerning the factors involved in celebrity endorsements, such as the type of products being endorsed and the advertising method employed in the campaign.

The long reach provided by the internet is explored by situating the phenomenon of advertising fashion blogging by McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips (2013). The internet makes a relatively large body of listeners readily available for the advertiser to propagate their product through the Megaphone Effect. Since they live most of their lives in the eyes of the public, their everyday activities come under constant scrutiny from the audience. In that regard, Ahmad and Swain (2011) delve into the rights afforded to celebrities and the laws surrounding intellectual properties they help create. By beginning with the personality, publicity, and privacy rights to which celebrities are entitled, they conclude by emphasising the need to protect celebrity rights.

Similarly, Assaf (2008) assesses the reciprocal relationship between the cultural meaning associated with trademarks and the positive emotions experienced by those who view them. Through the development of a semiotic model, to analyse the flow of importance between cultural signs, trademarks, and other contexts with similar applications. She argues that the legal system encourages consumer culture by protecting the cultural significance of trademarks.

Cronin (2007), on the other hand, explores the notion of advertisers as cultural intermediaries. She places them between the producer and the consumer and analyses the relationship between production and consumption, economy and culture. She utilises excerpts from her interviews with advertising practitioners from the UK to trace the path of advertising rhetoric and how it functions as a code of mediation for the advertiser. She also delves into the social impact of advertising and whether it has a proactive role in its audience.

Furthermore, Priya (2008) attempts to ascertain the place of virtual objects, mainly whether they can be considered legal properties. This status of virtual objects is demonstrated through analysis of virtual properties using Hegel's notions of intellectual properties, particularly Hegel's personality theory of property.

Several research articles deal with the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements and their consequent impact through media on audiences from different backgrounds.

### *1.2 Identified Problems and Possible Solutions*

The collision of art and advertising creates multitudinous hyperrealities, leading to cultural dilution. Cultural dilution diminishes the authenticity and value of the represented culture and widens the communication gap between producers and consumers. The continuous flow of hyperrealities generated through the blending of art and advertising diminishes the cultural significance of the represented culture. Elements of culture represented through available media are diluted and commodified representations. Additionally, the convergence of art, culture, and commerce blurs the boundaries between these realms and widens the communication gap between producers and consumers. The commercialisation of culture hampers meaningful dialogue and understanding between the creators and consumers of cultural products. The effects of cultural dilution can be countered by encouraging critical reflection and awareness among consumers about the influences of advertising and hyperrealities. Education and media literacy initiatives can empower viewers to make informed choices and discerningly engage with cultural products and advertising. Secondly, fostering platforms and spaces for independent artists and cultural creators can promote the production of authentic and meaningful cultural content. This initiative will infuse some fresh blood into the veins of culture, emphasise the value of artistic integrity and counteract the relentless commodification of culture. Lastly, encouraging ethical advertising practices that respect cultural products' integrity can help mitigate the adverse effects of cultural dilution. Furthermore, promoting transparency, honesty, and responsible advertising among advertisers can help maintain cultural representations' integrity and foster a healthier relationship between art, advertising, and the audience.

## **2. Theory and Methodology**

This paper performs a textual analysis of a novel in tandem with a textual analysis of the narrative rhetoric of advertisements published through influencers. The theoretical framework for this analysis is supplied by Baudrillard's 'Simulacra and Simulation' (1994) wherein he talks about symbols and signs in culture and media and how they relate to present times. This is supported by research material regarding advertising and celebrity endorsements. These will be the fulcrum on which this article rests. A textual analysis is appropriate for the objective of this article as it will direct focus towards the underlying ideas and cultural notions in a text. In this mode of study, everything is considered a text. It is similar to what Barthes performs in 'Mythologies' (1957). He analyses subjects ranging from professional wrestling, yacht cruises, and detergent advertisements to novels of Jules Verne and even the Citroën DS 19. This methodology is appropriate for this analysis as it is simultaneously inductive and interpretative. Furthermore, it aligns with the article's objectives: comprehending how symbols in culture are portrayed and transmuted and the causative factors of their subsequent dilution in the endless waves of content. The phenomena of cultural dilution is illustrated with real-world and in-text examples.

## **3. Influencers and Hyperreality**

McCracken (1989) posits that a celebrity is "any individual who enjoys public recognition and uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement." In the past, figures like actors, musicians, and athletes were considered celebrities. However, in the contemporary context, an individual who achieves notable success and fame in virtually any discipline can be termed a celebrity. (McCracken, 1989)

While the definition of a celebrity does not appear in any aspect of Indian legislation, there is a provision for the term 'performer' in section 2(qq) of the Indian Copyright Act, 1957, which deals with the rights of people who create intellectual properties and their

creations. The definition provided is,

“Performer includes all actor, singer, musician, dancer, acrobat, juggler, conjurer, snake charmer, a person delivering a lecture or any other person who makes any performance.” (Indian Copyright Act, 1957)

The act offers comprehensive coverage of personality rights, publicity rights, privacy rights, reproduction rights, lending rights, and distribution rights. However, all these rights can be funnelled into three terms: publicity, privacy, and personality. The popularity and fame that surrounds a celebrity are understood to be a reward for hard work and an offshoot of success. Athletes earn it by honing their skills, actors acquire it through displays of their acting prowess, and people of royal lineage inherit fame and public goodwill through the illustrious historical actions of their predecessors.

In ‘Chosen Spirits’ (2020), Basu places influencers as the next wave of celebrities. Influencers are human billboards displaying the merits or superiority of a particular product at a time when data and people’s attention are vital commodities (Basu, 2020). More often than not, they communicate with a faceless audience through digital and or social media. While musicians and actors gain legions of fans by working within the institutions they are involved in, influencers (e.g., Felix Kjellberg, a.k.a. PewDiePie, Amanda Cerny, Rabea Massad) gain followers without any institutional involvement. They acquire clout by simultaneously promoting themselves and the products they endorse. This aspect of self-promotion separates influencers from traditional celebrities.

The efficacy of celebrity endorsements is congruent with the celebrity’s credibility, expertise and overall appeal (Ohanian, 1991). Credibility is the aura of confidence emanated by the endorsee. Expertise refers to the repository of knowledge in their possession, and appeal is the extent to which the audience accepts it. When the audience believes that the endorser reflects their ideologies and concept of self, it elevates their desire to purchase the product that is being endorsed (Choi & Rifon, 2012).

While advertising as a form of marketing and communication has existed for aeons, advertising through influencers, on the other hand, is quite a novel phenomenon. The roots of modern advertising in media like print and video can be traced back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the widespread publication and consumption of newspapers and other similar periodicals (Turner, 1980). In its infancy, advertising was a way for publishers to mitigate publication expenses.

To offer a broader definition, advertising is an attempt to subtly persuade people to adopt particular ideas, buy products or even embrace specific lifestyles (Turow, 2015). Before this, advertising and advertisers were a group of people who argued why the products they were peddling were to be consumed. In this regard, Turow ascribes the status of handicrafts to advertising. Hawking and peddling wares were relatively common when there was a lack of widespread literacy among the populace. At this time, the advertisers relied on appealing to the target audience’s emotions. An example is present in Shakespeare’s ‘The Winter’s Tale’ (2017), where a peddler sings out the merits of buying his wares; simultaneously, he also lists the harm that will befall them were they to ignore his cries,

“...For my lads to give their dears;

Pins and poking-sticks of steel:

What maids lack from head to heel:

Come buy of me, come; come buy; come buy;

Buy, lads, or else your lasses cry:

Come buy.”

An early real-life example of customer-based marketing would be found in the case of the Cope Bros and Co. tobacco company founded in 1848. Cope’s employed different methods to appeal to the working-class and upper-class audiences separately. Tobacco marketed toward sailors and factory workers was purported to have a rugged taste, while the tobacco marketed toward people from the upper echelons of society laid down claims of being delicately fragrant. Through advertising, the company also rallied against the anti-tobacco lobbyists by promoting smoking as a healthy practice (Seaton, 1986).

Moreover, it is posited that brands are concerned with maintaining an image where there is importance towards the symbolic value added to a product by the celebrities who endorse it (Murphy, 1990). Through celebrities, brands generate an atmosphere of trust by having them list a product’s merits and differentiate it from other brands selling similar products (Erdogan et al., 2001).

While having celebrities endorse a product or promote a brand is an established advertising method, many companies now opt for influencers rather than celebrities to promote their brand and products (e.g. Grace Helbig for Amazon’s Audible). Before the advent of social media, television was the prime mode of advertising. Now, the target demographic is spread over many mediums. For companies, it becomes imperative to reach as many people as possible. Marketing their products using influencers is how they reach their social media demographic.

“Advertising through influencers allows brands to promote through someone that a niche community watches, engages with and trusts daily. So, instead of being sceptical of a commercial or social media ad, consumers are trusting that if their influencer of choice loves the product, they will too.” (Mathew, 2022).

Simultaneously, consumers are becoming wary of trusting brands through their advertising. Influencers offer a way for brands to locate and advertise to their demographic directly, thereby gaining their trust. The outcome is increased credibility of the brand’s image in the

eyes of the consumer and a higher rate of engagement with the brand that undergoes promotion.

“Engagement is related to a brand’s ability to establish solid and long-lasting relationships with their clients and potential clients. The consumer trusts and turns to the brand when they need certain solutions to certain problems, identifies with the brand’s values, understands its mission and therefore chooses to take their business to them, instead of millions of other competitors.” (Influency, 2019)

Apart from influencers, Basu shows ordinary people promoting the lifestyles of their affluent counterparts and becoming ‘power accessories’ in the hope of climbing the social ladder (Basu, 2020).

Primarily, influencers use word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing techniques to reach their audience. As their work occurs primarily online, many followers are waiting to listen to them. This allows them to gain followers without much intervention from third parties. McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips call this ‘the megaphone effect’ (McQuarrie et al., 2013). While they get reimbursed for their efforts, influencers focus on the acquisition of cultural capital along with traditional monetary capital. Though predominantly active on social media platforms, influencers cross over from social media to appear in television commercials (e.g., Kristina Bazan for L’Oréal).

The efforts of influencers are fruitful when the advertising is done through social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram or video-sharing sites like YouTube rather than traditional modes of advertising like print or television. This increased success is chiefly because people on the platforms above choose to follow influencers, and some even go as far as considering them to be a part of the community they are in (Gräve, 2017).

Indi Mathew is the prima donna influencer at Joey’s FlowCo, (Basu’s nomenclature for Talent Management Agencies). His virtual self has been curated and crafted after meticulous research into the whimsical predilections of the target demographic. Every action on his part is a performance. He has a whole posse of people, helmed by Joey, working hard to boost his meticulously curated personality in the eyes of the audience. Basu shows a disparity between Indi’s on-camera and off-camera personae. While his on-camera persona is the cumulation of all things that constitute an ideal man, off-camera, he is unscrupulous, narcissistic, vain and obsessed with having an untainted virtual image. Basu exemplifies this through Rudra’s perception of Indi’s personae. While Rudra is awed by his presence, he wishes to remove Indi from his life instead of helping him build his career (Basu, 2020).

Advertising practitioners are skilled in mediating communication about selling and have their values and culture into which novices to the industry are also initiated. For instance, the creatives, in this case, influencers, act dramatically and mercurially with an artistic temperament. (Hirota, 1995) The origin of a license to act in such a manner could be more apparent. The practitioners pluck elements from cultural trends in vogue and use them in their advertising campaigns. This feeding and trading occurring upon different aspects of culture results in a self-referential and recursive state of creation and consumption of culture. (Cronin, 2007)

This results in all media becoming absorbed into the banner of advertising. Baudrillard feels that advertising is superficial as a medium of communication; he adds that it lacks depth, and anything communicated through it is quickly forgotten. He also posits that all cultural activity gravitates toward advertising and continuously debilitates itself. In this regard, there is a convergence between propaganda and advertising. Baudrillard feels that advertising and propaganda are vernaculars of the masses and strive toward the highest degree of transparency possible. This convergence results in the various societal institutions becoming virtually indistinguishable. He attributes this condition of similarity to the fact that the same vernacular is at play in almost all the institutions up for debate (Baudrillard, 1994).

“This convergence defines a society-ours-in which there is no longer any difference between the economic and the political, because the same language reign in both from one end to the other; a society therefore where the political economy, literally speaking, is never fully realised.” (Baudrillard, 1994)

This combinatory effort turns society into what Baudrillard terms a ‘collective enterprise’ in which society becomes realised through advertising. Like hyperreality, this is not an actual reflection of society but a “vestige of sociality hallucinated on all the walls” (Baudrillard, 1994). In a scenario like this, advertising functions as a placebo and caters to all demands and problems put forth by society.

This effect is exacerbated by the fact that the language of advertising professes to uphold true neutrality and provide a means of debate through a rhetoric of equivalence. When in reality, it merely expresses a biased opinion of the advertiser. Baudrillard posits that advertising eliminates the need for individual belief through the rhetoric of equivalence. The function of this equivalent rhetoric is two-pronged. Firstly, it offers a simplified version of the information system in question. Secondly, it acts as a cultural and thought deterrent by not offering any new signifiers. It limits room for thought and directly affects how new information systems are generated and assimilated into society (Baudrillard, 1994).

There is little research about influencers and their role in endorsements, with both concepts being relatively novel in people’s lives. However, Basu posits that influencers have a pernicious effect on the audience. More often than not, they promote a go-getter way of life, and their endorsements contain a plethora of subliminal advertising and product placements from companies they endorse (Basu, 2020).

While a musician will have his catalogue of songs and a painter his repertoire of paintings, influencers do not have any tangible intellectual properties. Since there are no actual properties to protect, they are more vulnerable than traditional celebrities to having their right to privacy infringed upon. While their legacy is a combination of their reputation, the trust their audience places upon them, and virtual aspects like posts and clout on social and hawking endorsements about their sponsors and products, they share a common ground with traditional celebrities in the matter of privacy infringement (Ahmad & Swain, 2011).

People tend to personify or deify celebrities, leading to legions of fanatics obsessing over every detail of their lives. Rojek(2007) posits that the relationship between celebrities and their fans involves a high degree of one-sided emotional dependence, wherein the fanatic continuously projects positive emotions onto the celebrity. Some fanatics might even go as far as imagining themselves to be intimately involved with the celebrity in question. Additionally, Rojek proposes that the relationship between the fan and the celebrity is almost religious (Rojek, 2007).

### 3.1 Cultural Dilution

It is posited that corporate commercial interests tend to take over all forms of media. She also asserts that anything that attracts an audience will attract advertisers and that no aspect of mass media is safe from advertising. Advertisers see the audience as desirable recipients of advertising. In line with the changing audience, corporations also change their advertising tactics to ensure the smooth delivery of their promotional messages (Assaf, 2008). These aspects have permeated nearly all of contemporary mass media's scheduled programming.

By projecting commercially ideal versions of themselves, Influencers attenuate the significance of the culture they are trying to advertise through continuous representation. This attenuation occurs through the cultural fission created through repeated representation. Like the Beaubourg museum, influencers act as cultural incinerators. Their continuous and romanticised representation of culture through cold information systems dilutes the ideals they strive to represent (Baudrillard, 1994). This results in a deluge of information, ultimately turning the represented objects into something unremarkable. In the end, the flow of information is rapid compared to the rate at which meaning is derived. Ultimately, due to this process, the meaning associated with the final representation is rendered virtually insignificant.

Similarly, Basu presents influencers as the leeches of culture, parasitically feeding on the culture they represent. Baudrillard calls this dilution 'the liquidation of all referentials' (Baudrillard, 1994). The real is cast aside in this manner, and a nostalgia-fuelled replacement assumes its place. No part of the culture is safe from this dilution. For instance, the destitute apparel worn by hippies and punks was a statement against the societal mores and morals of the seventies. It offered an outlet by which people could rebel against the upper class by expressing themselves through their apparel. Soar (2000) posits that advertising endeavours are artless and prosaic instruments for capital accumulation. It redirects the individual's focus from their self towards theatrical displays of showmanship and entertainment. Additionally, Bourdieu (2000) views advertising creatives as intellectual lackeys who develop their code of communication to justify commercial practices and societal responsibilities.

The people in Punk culture appropriated cultural symbols typically associated with high society, such as the Union Jack and Tartan Plaid clothing and put their spin on them. Nowadays, clothing manufacturers like Urban Outfitters and Forever21 appropriated their fashion, consisting of ripped jeans, pins with obscene slogans, and distressed t-shirts, and marketing them at exorbitant prices as fresh and emerging trends in the world of fashion. Additionally, this goes against the grain of the DIY (Do It Yourself) aspect of Punk culture as all the articles of clothing sold by the manufacturers mentioned above are readymade and available across chains of stores.

"Punk originated as an "outsider" movement of rebellion, where a subjugated lower class are pitted against repressive elites or people from the upper strata of society. In a way, these fast-fashion brands represent the very antithesis of punk, whose anti-establishment original intentions are at odds with the profit-driven, diluted form typified by the mall outlets that copy them." (Santos and Avery, 2016).

This resulted in the dilution of anti-establishment sentiments originally purported by Punk Culture through aspects considered central to the notion of Punk Culture. This dilution is not limited to apparel and merchandise but also permeates the artist's performance space. This is evident in recording engineer Steve Albini's opinion on the corporate invasion of the music industry through music festivals like Lollapalooza and Coachella in a 1998 interview with Jon Bains;

"Lollapalooza is the worst example of corporate encroachment into what is supposed to be the underground. It is just a large scale marketing of bands that pretend to be alternative but are in reality just another facet of the mass cultural exploitation scheme." (Albini, 1998)

Albini's opinion is similar to Baudrillard's views on the Centre Pompidou. Baudrillard claims that the Beaubourg Museum is the 'hyperreality of culture' (Baudrillard,1994). He adds that the continuous stockpiling of cultural artefacts results in a social and cultural implosion, which will result in all the accumulated culture being devoured by the simulation in which it takes place. Baudrillard further posits that the museum is analogous to a hypermarket where rows of generic products are displayed. In the sense that the museum is to culture what the hypermarket is to commodities (Baudrillard, 1994).

In the case of 'Chosen Spirits'(2020), the dilution of culture is embodied in Narad. Narada Muni, often viewed as the Indian counterpart to the Greek Messenger God Mercury, is a staple character in Indian mythology. He appears in epics such as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and Sanskrit Puranas. In 'Chosen Spirits'(2020), characters have an AI assistant called Narad that monitors their vital signs and moods and handles their day-to-day calls and appointments. The mythological Narada Muni is an erudite scholar, well-versed in logic and the cycles of time. Furthermore, He uses his gift of prescience to dispense sagacious wisdom to those in need.

Narad from 'Chosen Spirits'(2020) is more like an intrusive secretary who offers to schedule therapist appointments and plays soothing videos when the wearer displays signs of stress. At the same time, Narad performs a messenger's duties, like intimating the wearer about incoming calls and dispensing warnings about air quality. The resemblances between the sophic deity and the AI assistant end there. Narad is also produced en masse, accentuating the mythical figure's dilution. This manner of dilution wherein a well-known entity is

repurposed and used for something unrelated to its original purpose is termed by Assaf as 'Dilution by Blurring' (Assaf, 2008). The result is the entity being deprived of its distinctive quality.

This dilution gives rise to a new hyperreality perpetuated by influencers like Indi. Hyperreality is a staple in literature set in post-modern technological societies. Works of SF (Science Fiction), such as Gibson's 'Neuromancer' (1984) or Dick's 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?' (1968) feature hyperreality prominently. The seamless bridging of the real and imaginary generates a false reality. This reality is ironically packaged and sold as something natural.

Phillip. K. Dick presents an instance of cultural dilution through repackaging in his 1962 novel 'The Man in the High Castle'. Dick espouses the difficulty involved in telling the real from the imitation through Wyndam Matson's exchange with Rita on the subject of FDR's assassination,

"One of those two Zippo lighters was in Franklin D. Roosevelt's pocket when he was assassinated. And one wasn't. One has historicity, a hell of a lot of it. As much as any object ever had. And one has nothing. Can you feel it?" He nudged her. "You can't. You can't tell which is which. There's no 'mystical plasmic presence,' no 'aura' around it." (Dick, 2012)

In 'Chosen Spirits'(2020), this repackaging of reality is exemplified when Tara is introduced as Indi's 'on-screen' girlfriend. The fulcrum of Indi's or any influencer's content is that it appears spontaneous and unscripted. Since the people behind the content, like camera people and editors, are not shown, it gives people an illusion that the viewers are privy to a first-hand account of intimate or confidential events. In reality, they are witnessing something viewed by legions of viewers and have been crafted meticulously to appease audiences from varied backgrounds. Baudrillard posits that this paradox fascinates the viewer rather than the perverse pleasure of witnessing a person's private life (Baudrillard, 1994).

This is perpetuated by using what David Thurlow terms 'anti-social technology'. Technology like Virtual Reality (VR), 3D Television, and Video Games fall under this category. These aspects of technology are used in isolation rather than in a communal setting to maximise their effectiveness. As Robert Putnam (2022) writes in 'Bowling Alone',

"The rise of electronic communications and entertainment is one of the most powerful social trends of the twentieth century. In important respects this revolution has lightened our souls and enlightened our minds, but it has also rendered our leisure more private and passive. More and more of our time and money are spent on goods and services consumed individually, rather than those consumed collectively" (Putnam, 2022).

Virtual reality accentuates hyperreality by bringing the viewer close to things they might not usually be able to access and letting them do things apart from being passive participants. This is possible through a stereoscopic Head-Mounted Display (HMD) accompanied by audio, haptic, and sensory interfaces. In Virtual Reality, the division between reality and simulation is rather needle-like. There is no edge of the screen and virtually no screen separating the participant and the world into which they are immersed. As Jaron Lanier, the 'Father of Virtual Reality' writes in his 2010 book, 'You Are Not a Gadget',

"The body and the rest of reality no longer have a prescribed boundary. So what are you at this point? You're floating in there, as a center of experience. You notice you exist, because what else could be going on? I think of VR as a consciousness-noticing machine" (Lanier, 2010).

The final result of such an immersion combines increased cognisance and an elevated emotional reaction from the subject (Lanier, 2010). While viewers believe they are witnessing Indi choosing his partner, he is merely announcing a choice that has already been made after meticulous interviews and background checks. Even the segment about Indi and Tara being in a relationship is a veiled promotion for an app that tests the compatibility of two people in a relationship (Basu, 2020). Ironically, after meticulous research, the experiment fails even after selecting a partner, as the app dictates that their compatibility levels are substandard (Basu, 2020).

Baudrillard compares offering up one's personal life to the eyes of the masses to ritualistic sacrifice. He believes that the statistically perfect specimens presented on screen are simultaneously glorified and condemned to die through the medium they are represented in (Baudrillard, 1994). Similarly, Indi's spontaneous albeit short-lived fall from grace happens on camera when he is accused of sexual misconduct by fellow influencer Sharmila (Basu, 2020).

The condemnation stems from the fact that the participants of the flow experience a manipulated version of reality. In 'Chosen Spirits'(2020), Basu displays the line demarcating the on and off-screen world to be relatively narrow, and characters weave in and out of either world. This results in difficulties in distinguishing the real world from the simulated world.

Similarly, the medium, message, and audience divisions often need to be clarified as they merge. This overlap between the medium, message and audience occurs as the reader is privy to both on and off-screen incidents. The result resembles watching a film while the director explains each scene.

#### **4. Conclusion: Measures to Mitigate Cultural Dilution and Its Corollary Effects**

Leiss, Kline and Jhally (1990) suggest that advertising has a proactive role in society by organising and mediating social and cultural changes. They posit that advertising is communication between the producer, advertiser and consumer. Advertising serves as a space where change occurs and can be witnessed.

Baudrillard posits that the creation of hyperrealities is an event whose progress cannot be stopped. It is an inevitable process that exists in

any simulation. When something exists, it automatically stimulates the generation of countless copies that eventually bear no resemblance to the source from which it is derived. This simulation eventually becomes so effectual that it overshadows and engulfs the source over time (Baudrillard, 1994).

Similarly, Influencers like Indi perpetuate hyperreality by including subtle advertisements and product placements in their content. In many ways, most things we believe and experience as art are a collection of various modes of expression, as a constant undertone of advertising accompanies them. (Baudrillard, 1994).

Anne Cronin views advertisers and their practitioners as incipient in three functions: persuading the consumer, disseminating capitalist ideologies and articulating cultural change. Through this, we can view influencers, who are practitioners of modern-day advertising, as cultural entrepreneurs with the aim to, as Featherstone (2007) puts it, educate people through postmodern pedagogies in the art of consumption. This education plays a part in how a person is perceived in society because the economy they participate in evaluates and judges them through the things they buy, their standard of living and the subsequent lifestyles they may adopt (Bourdieu, 2000).

The result is a dilution of the things they represent on screen. This occurs because advertising lacks the depth of the sources it absorbs; it is entirely superficial and lacks room for change or improvement (Baudrillard, 1994). In recent times, advertising has taken on the added function of corporate subterfuge. Using the advertisers' stake in art and media institutions, they push their products onto the consumer. Once they discover that an institution of the media can be used to further their ends, they immediately exploit it (Assaf, 2008).

An example is the Coca-Cola company's acquisition of Columbia Pictures in 1982 (Berry, 1982). Shortly after this, they forbade the use and display of products from other soft drink companies in films distributed through Columbia Pictures. This example illustrates how corporations use media censorship for their prerogative. Since these practices propagate consumer culture, several media houses have stringent policies against on-screen critiques of advertising, capitalism, or consumer culture.

As practitioners of advertising, influencers act as cultural intermediaries between the product and the consumer. In contemporary society, their significance is on the rise. To meet the dynamic tastes of a consumer base, the advertising industries are broadening their retinue of consultants, allowing them to engage in more intensive promotional practices that masquerade as creative efforts. The promotional methods include promoting the product and the creatives involved in it.

The cultural flow of an advertisement rests upon the aim of the advertiser and the clients. Hackley (2002) posits that clients prefer to stick to familiar forms of advertising, which lends an air of conservatism to creating an advertisement. Additionally, advertising exists in more than just a cultural context. Through its existence, it subsequently generates a diluted variant of the culture it occupies. All societal aspects advertising incorporates into its content are recycled to be utilised as strategies for future advertisements.

Another manner in which influencers perpetuate hyperreality is through live streams and video logs. While a willing suspension of disbelief is a staple aspect of fiction, it is also present in the people experiencing the content, supposedly providing an unflinching look into a content creator's personal life. The viewers operate under the illusion that they are witnessing something spontaneous and unplanned to which not everyone is privy to bear witness.

The content experienced by the viewers is meticulously manufactured. However, this masquerade, the belief that whatever is being revealed is an authentic, untouched human experience, keeps the simulation thriving. The consumer is simultaneously a victim and a part of the process that generates the myths they see. This is because advertising is sourced in society, and people populate the culture it embodies. Therefore, the advertising codes should not be taken as the beliefs and opinions of the advertiser. This is an undesirable outcome because the line between the medium and the message becomes equivocal. The final result is a situation where the veil dividing advertising from artistic creations is somewhat translucent. Additionally, culture becomes an object to be consumed in a rapid binge of media-generated content. This barrage of content results in culture and commerce bleeding into each other, particularly concerning content creation, which widens the divide between the producer and the consumer (Latour, 1993). Advertising is an indispensable part of commerce. However, by impinging on art and culture to market products, a parasitical relationship between art and advertising ensues. Ultimately, advertising gradually lessens the significance of the culture it feeds from and the technology used to propagate it exacerbates the process of dilution and duplication. The article's primary focus is on the role of advertising and its impact on cultural dilution from the perspective of advertisers and the production of content. Further research could aid in understanding how individuals navigate and make meaning of the hyperrealities constructed through advertising. Secondly, while the text touches upon corporate subterfuge, media censorship and ethics in advertising, research in the near future could examine the effect of advertisements on the social values and mental well-being of the individual who experiences advertising. Lastly, further research could be done to examine the effects and implications of cultural dilution through advertising in other cultures.

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