RESEARCH PAPER

From Instagram to the Silver Screen: Digital Content Creators as Emerging Actors in Indian Cinema

[1] Dr. Ansu Elsa Joy, [2] Dr. M. Lakshmipriya, [3] Devika Vidyasagaran Pillai

[1]Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication, Faculty of Science and Humanities, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur. Email: ansuj@srmist.edu.in. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6785-7801

[2]Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication, Faculty of Science and Humanities, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur. Email: lakshmim6@srmist.edu.in. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9916-4501

[3]Postgraduate Student, Department of Visual Communication, Faculty of Science and Humanities, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur. Email: davevidyasagar@gmail.com. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7810-3586

Corresponding Author: Dr. Ansu Elsa Joy

ABSTRACT

Digital media platforms have increasingly reshaped the ways in which creative talent is discovered and integrated into contemporary entertainment industries. Among these platforms, Instagram has emerged as a prominent space where creators produce short-form videos, construct performative identities, and cultivate large follower communities. In recent years, several Instagram-based creators have transitioned from online popularity to acting roles in Indian mainstream cinema, indicating a shift in conventional entry pathways to film careers. This study examines how digital content creators move from Instagram to film acting by analyzing the online content of six creators who later appeared in Indian cinema. Using qualitative content analysis, selected Instagram posts were examined with attention to performance style, online persona, narrative format, audience engagement, and film-related indicators. The findings reveal that creators initially gain recognition through relatable humor, character-driven storytelling, and consistent interaction with followers, which contribute to the formation of distinctive digital personas. As their visibility and audience engagement increase, these creators attract opportunities within the film industry. The study highlights Instagram's growing role as an informal talent discovery platform that is reshaping contemporary pathways to acting careers in Indian cinema.

Keywords: *Instagram, Online Persona, Indian Cinema, Digital Creators, Talent Discovery.*

How to cite this article: Joy AE, Lakshmipriya M, Pillai DV. From Instagram to the Silver Screen: Digital Content Creators as Emerging Actors in Indian Cinema. Int J Drug Deliv Technol. 2026;16(10s): 69-76; DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.10s.9

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of media industries in the digital age has significantly reshaped how talent is discovered, promoted, and integrated into mainstream entertainment. Social media platforms have created new opportunities for individuals to showcase creativity, build audiences, and establish recognizable public identities outside traditional media structures. Among these platforms, Instagram has gained particular prominence as a space where creators produce short-form videos, comedic sketches, lifestyle content, and performance-oriented material that attract large and engaged audiences. As a result, digital creators are no longer confined to online spaces; many are increasingly entering established media industries such as cinema (Abidin, 2018; Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

The rise of digital content creators has challenged the conventional pathways through which actors typically enter the film industry. Traditionally, aspiring performers relied on formal training, theatre backgrounds, talent agencies, or professional networks to secure acting opportunities. However, the growing influence of social media has altered this dynamic by enabling creators to build strong personal brands and demonstrate their performance abilities directly to the public. Through continuous content production and audience interaction, creators develop distinctive online personas and cultivate loyal follower communities, which significantly enhance their visibility within the entertainment industry (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017; Marwick, 2015).

This shift has also influenced the strategies used by filmmakers and casting professionals in identifying potential actors. Social media platforms increasingly function as informal talent pools where casting directors can observe a creator's screen presence, performance style, audience engagement, and popularity metrics. The existence of a pre-established fan base can make digital creators attractive casting choices, as their online followers may translate into promotional value and audience interest for film projects. Consequently, the boundaries between digital popularity and cinematic recognition are becoming increasingly fluid (Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

In the context of Indian cinema, where star power and audience connection remain crucial for a film's commercial success, the movement of digital creators into acting roles reflects a broader transformation in celebrity culture and media production. Content creators who gain recognition

through Instagram often bring distinctive styles of humor, storytelling, and performance shaped by digital media formats. Their transition into films illustrates how contemporary entertainment industries are adapting to a media environment in which online visibility and audience engagement can influence professional opportunities and career mobility (Abidin, 2018; Senft, 2013).

While several studies have examined influencer culture and digital celebrity, limited research has explored how Instagram-based content creators transition into mainstream film acting within the Indian cinema context.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the growing presence of digital content creators in mainstream cinema. Specifically, the study aims to analyze whether digital creators are cast in films based on their established online personas and performance styles, investigate the role of Instagram as a platform for talent discovery by filmmakers and casting directors, and examine how Instagram functions as an alternative pathway for aspiring performers seeking entry into mainstream Indian cinema. Through this analysis, the research seeks to understand how social media-driven visibility is reshaping talent identification and career trajectories within the contemporary film industry.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The growing convergence between digital media and traditional entertainment industries has significantly transformed the processes of talent discovery and celebrity formation. With the widespread use of social networking platforms, individuals are now able to create, distribute, and monetize content independently, enabling them to gain recognition outside conventional media institutions. Platforms such as Instagram have become important spaces for creators to build audiences through short-form videos, lifestyle content, and performance-based storytelling. This shift has contributed to the emergence of digital influencers and content creators whose online visibility increasingly translates into opportunities within mainstream media industries, including cinema and television.

Scholars studying digital celebrity culture emphasize that online fame is often constructed through strategic self-presentation and sustained audience interaction. Theresa M. Senft (2013) introduced the concept of micro-celebrity, explaining how individuals cultivate a form of self-generated fame by performing their identities online and engaging continuously with followers. Similarly, Alice E. Marwick (2015) highlights the role of self-branding in social media environments, arguing that users deliberately curate their online personas in order to attract attention and maintain visibility. These theoretical perspectives provide an important foundation for understanding how digital creators develop distinctive identities that may extend beyond social media platforms and open opportunities within traditional entertainment industries.

Research on influencer culture further demonstrates how social media platforms function as spaces where identity construction, creative labour, and audience engagement intersect. Khamis, Ang, and Welling (2017) describe influencers as individuals who transform aspects of their personal identity into a marketable brand through consistent content production and interaction with audiences. Abidin (2018) also observes that digital creators often emphasize authenticity and relatability in their content, which strengthens audience loyalty and engagement. Such qualities make influencers particularly appealing to media industries, as they bring recognizable personalities and established follower communities that can potentially contribute to audience reach and promotional strategies.

Another area of scholarship focuses on the relationship between digital platforms and mainstream entertainment industries. Scholars such as Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (2019) describe the rise of social media entertainment, referring to a media ecosystem in which online creators and traditional media institutions increasingly intersect. According to this perspective, digital platforms act as informal training grounds where creators experiment with storytelling, develop performance skills, and cultivate audiences before transitioning into professional media sectors. This framework suggests that social media platforms can function as talent incubators for the contemporary entertainment industry.

Scholars have also examined how digital popularity influences casting and production practices within media industries. Hou (2019) introduces the concept of platform capital, referring to the social and economic value associated with online visibility, follower counts, and audience engagement. From an industry perspective, casting digital creators with large followings can enhance promotional efforts and expand potential audience reach. Consequently, social media personalities are increasingly viewed not only as performers but also as promotional assets capable of attracting viewers to film projects.

Within broader discussions of celebrity culture, Graeme Turner (2013) argues that digital media has blurred the boundaries between ordinary individuals and traditional celebrities. Social media platforms allow users to bypass traditional gatekeeping mechanisms that historically controlled access to the entertainment industry, thereby creating alternative pathways to fame. Although research on digital influencers has grown considerably, limited studies have specifically examined the transition of social media creators into mainstream cinema, particularly within the Indian film industry. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining how digital content creators move from social

media platforms to film acting roles and how platform visibility and online personas influence emerging patterns of talent discovery in contemporary cinema.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to examine how digital content creators transition from social media platforms to mainstream cinema. Content analysis enables the systematic examination of media content to identify patterns, themes, and representational strategies within creators' online performances. The study specifically focuses on the role of Instagram as the primary platform through which creators establish their online presence and visibility before entering the film industry.

Research Design

The research follows a qualitative descriptive design using content analysis of Instagram content shared by the selected creators. Since the platform is widely used by content creators to showcase short-form videos, performance-based sketches, and personal branding strategies, it serves as an appropriate space to observe how creators develop their online personas and engage with audiences. By analyzing creators who have successfully transitioned from Instagram content creation to film acting, the study aims to understand how this platform may function as a potential talent discovery space for filmmakers and casting directors.

Sample Selection

A purposive sampling technique was used to select digital content creators who initially gained popularity through Instagram and later appeared as actors in films. The selection was based on the following criteria:

1. The creator must have built their public recognition primarily through Instagram.
2. The creator must maintain consistent and regular content activity on Instagram.
3. The creator must have appeared in at least one film or acting project.

Based on these criteria, six creators were selected for the study, representing both North and South Indian digital creator communities.

North Indian Creators

- Prajakta Koli (Mostlysane)
- Kusha Kapila
- Harsh Beniwal

South Indian Creators

- Harshath Khan
- Monisha Blessy
- Siju Sunny

These creators were selected because they represent individuals who have built substantial popularity on Instagram and subsequently transitioned into acting roles in films.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected exclusively from the creators' official Instagram profiles. The analysis focused on three main aspects of their Instagram presence:

1. Early content posts, particularly videos and reels that contributed to their initial popularity on the platform.
2. Overall reach and audience response to the creator's Instagram content, including the visibility and popularity of their posts.
3. Recent posts and updates, including content related to their transition into film acting and promotions of film projects.

Only publicly available posts from the creators' Instagram pages were examined for the purpose of this analysis.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in this study is an individual Instagram video post or reel uploaded by the selected creators. Each post was treated as a single analytical unit and examined for its performance elements, narrative style, caption context, and audience engagement indicators such as likes and comments.

Sampling of Content

For each creator, selected Instagram posts were analyzed from two different phases of their content creation:

1. Early Content Phase – videos and posts that helped establish their popularity and online identity.
2. Post-Recognition Phase – posts shared around the period when the creators entered the film industry or began promoting their acting projects.

This comparison allowed the study to observe possible changes in content style, performance presentation, and professional identity over time. For the purpose of systematic analysis, six Instagram posts were selected from each creator's profile. Three posts were chosen from the early content phase, which contributed to the creator's initial popularity, and three posts were selected from the period following their entry into the film industry. In total, 36 Instagram posts across the six selected creators were analyzed as units of analysis.

Coding Scheme and Codebook

A coding framework was developed to systematically categorize the content observed in the selected Instagram posts. The coding scheme focused on identifying elements of online performance that may relate to the creators' transition into film acting.

Table 1. Coding Categories Used for Content Analysis

Category	Description
Performance Style	Type of acting or performance displayed (comedy sketches,

	character portrayal, storytelling, mimicry)
Online Persona	Personality traits projected by the creator (humorous, relatable, dramatic, lifestyle-oriented)
Narrative Format	Structure of the content (sketch, situational comedy, dialogue-based video, storytelling)
Audience Engagement	Level of interaction measured through likes, comments, and follower responses
Film Industry Indicators	Content referencing acting roles, film promotions, collaborations with film personalities

Data Analysis

The coded data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in performance style, online persona construction, and audience engagement strategies. The analysis further explored how these characteristics may have contributed to the creators' transition from Instagram-based content creation to acting roles in mainstream cinema.

By focusing exclusively on Instagram as the primary platform, the study seeks to understand how visibility, audience engagement, and performative content on this platform influence emerging pathways to film acting within the contemporary entertainment industry.

RESULTS

The analysis of the selected creators' Instagram profiles indicates a clear progression from early digital content creation to film acting opportunities. By examining their initial content creation phase, peak popularity period, and film debut announcements on Instagram, the study identifies patterns in performance style, audience engagement, and career transition. The findings for each creator are presented below with reference to the years of content creation and film releases.

1. Prajakta Koli

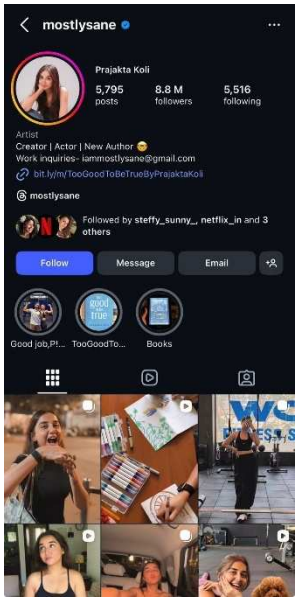


Figure 1: Official Instagram page of Prajakta Koli (Source: Instagram).

Initial Content Creation (2015–2016):

Prajakta Koli began creating short-form comedy content around 2015. Her early Instagram posts featured relatable sketches portraying everyday situations such as family interactions, college life, and friendships. These early videos helped establish her identity as a humorous storyteller with expressive acting skills.

Peak Content Creation Phase (2018–2021):

Between 2018 and 2021, Prajakta's Instagram reels gained widespread popularity. Her posts during this period often included structured comedic narratives, character-based storytelling, and collaborations with other digital creators. Audience engagement during this period increased significantly as her follower count grew.

Film Debut:

Prajakta made her film debut with *JugJugg Jeeyo* (2022). Her Instagram page included promotional posts and behind-the-scenes images related to the film.

Other Acting Projects:

Following her film debut, she continued appearing in digital series and film-related projects while maintaining an active Instagram presence promoting her acting work.

Film Appearance:



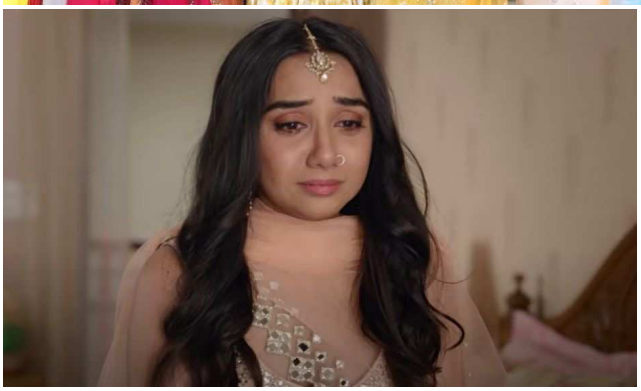


Figure 2 - 3: Film appearance of Prajakta Koli in *JugJugg Jeeyo* (2022). Source: Film still.

2. Kusha Kapila

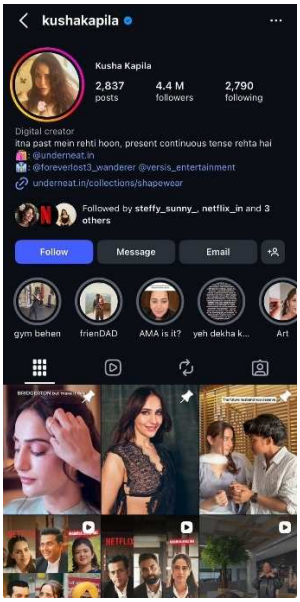


Figure 4: Official Instagram page of Kusha Kapila (Source: Instagram).

Initial Content Creation (2016–2017):

Kusha Kapila began gaining attention through Instagram videos around 2016. Her early posts featured satirical sketches portraying exaggerated urban characters and social stereotypes, which quickly resonated with audiences.

Peak Content Creation Phase (2019–2021):

During this period, Kusha's content included recurring characters and structured comedic narratives that attracted significant audience engagement. Her satirical portrayals of lifestyle culture and social behaviour strengthened her digital persona.

Film Debut:

Kusha Kapila entered mainstream cinema in 2020, she later appeared in the Hindi film *Thank You for Coming* (2023), where she appeared alongside other actors from the Hindi film industry.

Other Film Projects:

After her debut, Kusha continued to participate in film and web series projects while maintaining her identity as a digital creator.

Film Appearance:





Figure 5 - 6: Film appearance of Kusha Kapila in *Thank You for Coming* (2023). Source: Film still.

3. Harsh Beniwal

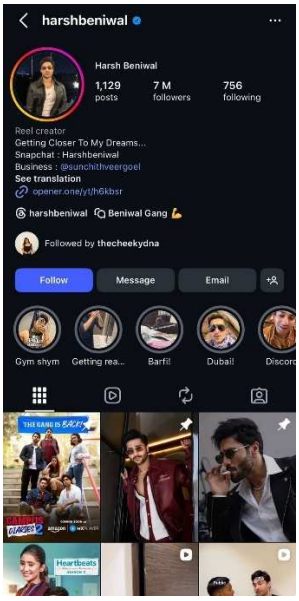


Figure 7: Official Instagram page of Harsh Beniwal (Source: Instagram).

Initial Content Creation (2015–2016):

Harsh Beniwal began posting humorous short videos on Instagram around 2015. His early posts focused on exaggerated comedic expressions and relatable social scenarios involving friends and youth culture.

Peak Content Creation Phase (2017–2019):

Between 2017 and 2019, Harsh's videos became more elaborate and narrative-driven, often featuring multiple characters and situational comedy. These videos attracted millions of views and significantly increased his online visibility.

Film Debut:

Harsh Beniwal made his film debut in 2019 with *Student of the Year 2*, where he played a supporting role.

Other Acting Projects:

Following this debut, he continued participating in acting projects while maintaining strong engagement with audiences through Instagram content.

Film Appearance:





Figure 8 - 9: Film appearance of Harsh Beniwal in *Student of the Year 2* (2019). Source: Film still.

4. Harshath Khan

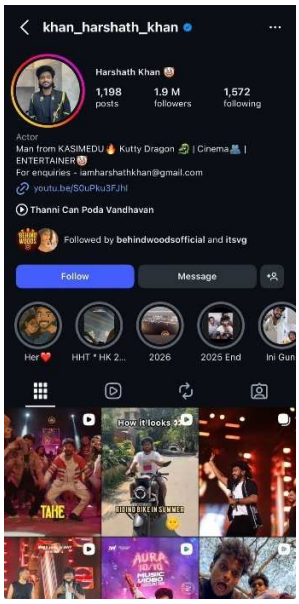


Figure 10: Official Instagram page of Harshath Khan (Source: Instagram).

Initial Content Creation (2018–2019):

Harshath Khan began creating comedic and performance-oriented Instagram videos around 2018. His early posts portrayed humorous depictions of everyday social interactions.

Peak Content Creation Phase (2020–2022):

During this period, Harshath's content incorporated clearer narrative structures and character portrayals, which attracted a larger audience and increased engagement on his page.

Film Debut:

Harshath Khan made his Tamil film debut in *Dragon* (2025). His transition from digital creator to film actor was reflected on his Instagram page through promotional posts

Other Film Projects:

He continues to maintain his Instagram presence while participating in entertainment and film-related projects.

Film Appearance:



Figure 11 - 12: Film appearance of Harshath Khan in *Dragon* (2025) *& Aaromaley* (2025). Source: Film still.

5. Monisha Blessy

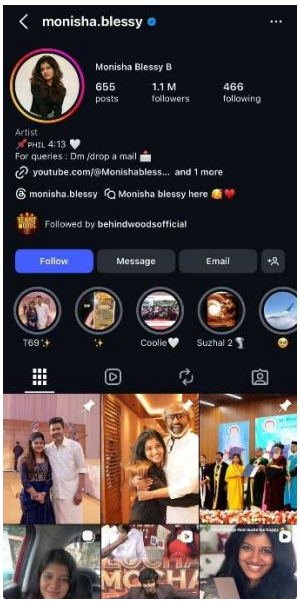


Figure 13: Official Instagram page of Monisha Blessy (Source: Instagram).

Initial Content Creation (2019–2020):

Monisha Blessy began sharing Instagram videos portraying relatable experiences and humorous storytelling. Her early content focused on expressive acting and situational comedy.

Peak Content Creation Phase (2021–2022):

Her popularity increased as she posted more refined performance-oriented videos, including dialogue-driven storytelling and character portrayals that resonated with audiences.

Film Debut:

Monisha Blessy made her Tamil film debut with *Maaveeran* (2023) alongside the lead actor of the film.

Other Film Projects:

She continues to combine content creation with acting opportunities.

Film Appearance:



Figure 14 - 15: Film appearance of Monisha Blessy in *Maaveeran (2023).* Source: Film still.

6. Siju Sunny

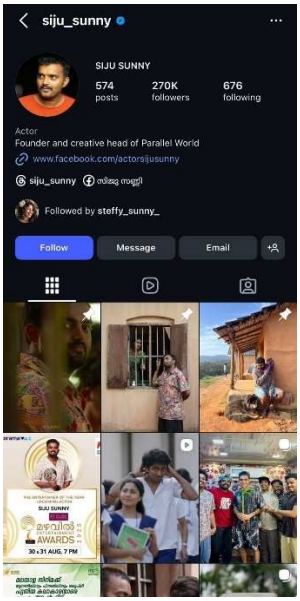


Figure 16: Official Instagram page of Siju Sunny (Source: Instagram).

Initial Content Creation (2019–2020):

Siju Sunny began sharing performance-oriented content on Instagram around 2019. His early posts largely featured short comedy sketches and relatable everyday situations that resonated strongly with younger digital audiences.

Peak Content Creation Phase (2021–2022):

During this period, his content evolved with more structured storytelling, better editing, and collaborative sketches, which helped increase the reach and audience engagement of his videos on the platform.

Film Debut:

Siju Sunny made his Malayalam film debut with *Visudha Mejo* (2022).

Other Film Projects:

His major recognition came through the horror-comedy film *Romancham* (2023), in which he portrayed the quirky character, Mukesh.

Film Appearance:



Figure 17 - 18 : Film appearance of Siju Sunny in *Vaazha* (2024) *& Maranamass* (2025) (Source: Film still)

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the growing importance of Instagram as a platform that enables digital creators to transition into mainstream cinema. The analysis shows that most creators followed a similar trajectory consisting of three stages: the initial phase of experimenting with short-form videos, a peak phase marked by increased visibility and audience engagement, and finally the transition into film acting. This progression suggests that Instagram functions not only as a space for entertainment but also as a platform where creators develop performance skills, build recognizable online identities, and gain industry visibility. In a broader context, these patterns indicate that social media platforms are increasingly influencing how talent is discovered and promoted within contemporary media industries.

The themes identified in the results, such as character-based storytelling, relatable humor, and strong audience interaction demonstrate how digital creators cultivate distinctive online personas that contribute to their popularity. The ability to engage audiences through consistent content creation allowed creators such as Prajakta Koli, Kusha Kapila, and Harsh Beniwal to develop recognizable personal brands. Similarly, creators like Harshath Khan, Monisha Blessy, and Siju Sunny built audience communities through relatable storytelling and expressive performances. In a broader sense,

these trends demonstrate that digital platforms allow individuals to showcase acting abilities and creative storytelling outside traditional industry structures, thereby creating new pathways for professional recognition.

The results of this study also align with existing theoretical perspectives on digital celebrity culture. The concept of micro-celebrity proposed by Theresa M. Senft suggests that individuals can cultivate fame through strategic self-presentation and continuous interaction with followers on social media. The creators examined in this study demonstrate this process through their consistent engagement with audiences and the development of identifiable digital personas. Similarly, the emphasis on personal branding and curated online identities corresponds with the work of Alice E. Marwick, who argues that social media users strategically construct their online presence to maintain visibility and influence.

The findings also support the arguments of Stuart Cunningham and David Craig regarding the emergence of social media entertainment, where digital platforms function as spaces that intersect with traditional media industries. The transition of these creators into films such as *JugJugg Jeeyo* (2022), *Student of the Year 2* (2019), *Maaveeran* (2023), and *Visudha Mejo* (2022) demonstrates how online popularity can translate into opportunities within mainstream cinema. In comparison with earlier studies that primarily focused on Western contexts, this research highlights similar developments within Indian media industries, suggesting that social media platforms are becoming important talent discovery spaces across multiple regional film sectors.

Overall, the study confirms that digital visibility, audience engagement, and personal branding have become significant factors shaping contemporary acting careers. By enabling creators to experiment with storytelling, connect with audiences, and gain public recognition, Instagram contributes to the transformation of traditional pathways to celebrity and professional acting opportunities. These findings therefore reinforce the idea that digital platforms are increasingly integrated into the processes of talent identification and celebrity formation within the modern entertainment landscape.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, the rapid development of digital media platforms has transformed the processes through which creative talent becomes visible within the entertainment industry. Social networking sites provide individuals with opportunities to showcase their creative abilities and reach large audiences beyond conventional media structures. Social networking platforms have created alternative pathways for emerging performers to gain visibility and recognition within the film industry. In this context, the present study examined the transition of digital creators into film acting by analyzing the Instagram activity of the creators. By examining their early posts, periods of increased popularity, and film-related updates on Instagram, the study explored how online creative activity contributes to opportunities within mainstream cinema.

The findings indicate that the selected creators initially attracted attention through short-form videos that presented relatable humor, everyday experiences, and character-driven storytelling. As their audience engagement and follower base increased, their content evolved into more structured and performance-oriented videos that demonstrated performative abilities and narrative skills. This stage of heightened digital popularity helped establish recognizable online identities, which may have contributed to their visibility among filmmakers and casting professionals. Consequently, several creators transitioned into acting roles in films illustrating how digital recognition can intersect with opportunities in the film industry.

Another important observation is that this transition occurs across multiple regional cinema contexts within India. While some of the selected creators moved into Hindi cinema, others entered Tamil and Malayalam film industries, suggesting that the influence of digital platforms extends beyond a single linguistic or cultural environment. These developments indicate that social media creators are increasingly recognized as potential performers who already possess audience familiarity and visibility, which may also support film promotion and audience engagement.

Although the study provides insights into the growing relationship between social media content creation and film acting opportunities, it is limited by the small sample size and its focus on a single platform. Future research could examine a larger group of creators across multiple digital platforms and explore audience perceptions of social media personalities appearing in films. Such investigations may further clarify how digital popularity influences casting decisions and how emerging performers navigate the evolving relationship between online media environments and mainstream cinema.

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