LSE Media and Communications

Media@LSE MSc Dissertation Series

Editors: Bart Cammaerts and Lisa Derand

Mediated Social Class Identity

Articulation and Performance Over Social Media

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Published by Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science ("LSE"), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

ABSTRACT

Individuals' subjective processes cannot be studied without understanding the classed, gendered and racialised experiences that shape these identities, especially in the age of neoliberal policies and individualised discourses of progress and growth. How do individuals reflect on the hierarchies in their life-worlds and how do they position themselves (or view themselves positioned as) within these hierarchies? What is the nature of the labour they put in these processes, and what implications does it have on their previous experiences with difference and exclusion?

This dissertation shows the nature of the reflexive and positioning processes undertaken by individuals of contemporary neoliberal times through their use of social media. Specifically, it studies the practices of articulation and performance of classed identities over social media, situated within the contexts of their life-trajectories – their experiences with class and other differentiations, their attempts to navigate these differences through aspiration for mobility, and their internal subjective processes through these journeys. Guided by Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus', as well as Diane Reay's psychic landscape of social class, it draws relationships between the internal and external aspects of class identity.

Based on the twelve interviews conducted with individuals whose life stories are deeply situated in neoliberal contexts, this dissertation concludes that while reflexivity is a basic attribute of all human beings, the habitus – a set of predispositions inculcated in the early life-worlds to make sense of reality – continues to exist for individuals throughout their life trajectories. The labour of constantly positioning oneself in a classed reality is a product of the symbolic violence that makes up one's habitus, and the 'reflexive modernity' thesis continues to inflict this violence through the ideological expectation of aspiration.

INTRODUCTION

The changing nature of social class boundaries in the contemporary age has thrown the approaches of traditional class analysis for a toss. It has produced an ambiguity of different class signifiers as well as the different class identities that they signified. However, this does not imply an end of class as a social classifier, but instead contributes to the invisibility of difference and inequality. This invisibility is a characteristic feature of the neoliberal age, exemplified by the rise of many individualist ideologies such as meritocracy and postfeminism, that are "based on self-determination," and according to which, an individual's fate is a consequence of their unique decisions (Callero, 2013:15; also see Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001). As per these ideologies, individuals of the neoliberal age are self-determining, depoliticized, constantly reinventing themselves (Gil, 2008). Such concepts function to legitimize contemporary capitalism by downplaying structural inequalities to artfully construct the right to equality as the individual's own burden.

This ambiguity of structural classifications and their oppressions has made class identity a concept that is as fuzzy for social researchers as it is real for individuals and their lived experiences. This ambiguous nature of class and other identities in the contemporary times, however, also offers a ground to study inequality and its implications for individuals and the role it plays in their daily lives. This is because for articulating and performing identity, individuals rely on perspectives and experiences ingrained in their early life-worlds, what Bourdieu calls the 'habitus'. "Because perspective is always premised upon access to knowledge, it is always implicated in power relations," (Skeggs, 2004).

Social media often functions as the ground for this identity work due to its interactive, almost 'second-world' nature. Although like all forms of social expression, social media also privileges a certain type of personality, and not all individuals perform the same amount or type of identity work online as they would offline. However, apart from the resources to form and express positionalities that social media offers, it is also a suitable platform to study the nature of class identity in the neoliberal age because of the discourses that float on mainstream

social media applications. As discovered in this study, all participants agree to have been presented with trends, posts, hashtags, etc. that amplified neoliberal values of efficiency, progress, innovation and upward mobility.

Against the backdrop of meritocracy and other individualised narratives, this raises some interesting questions. How do persons of the individualised era reflexively negotiate their class identity with the neoliberal concepts they are constantly presented with over social media? Do they perform this negotiated identity and if yes, does this performativity tie in with their class positionality? And what does this labour spent on positioning themselves imply for the symbolic violence, 'the hidden injuries of class,' that are embedded in their habitus?

Studies of subjectivity are not merely interesting pieces of research, offering a window into people's cognitive processes, but are insights into decades and centuries of oppressions and how they continue to shape our life-worlds and society at large. As such, this study treats the online articulation and performance processes of individuals as an empirical lens to investigate wider realities of class and capital-based symbolic (and physical) violence. It endeavours to study articulation and performance practices on social media as forms of reflexivity around classed identities, and class positionality. These concepts are approached through narrations and dialogue around experiences of difference, exclusion and coping – through education, as well as before and after it.

This dissertation is an ambitious attempt to study identity through the lens of class while respecting intersectionality and is based on the fundamental idea that one identity-marker cannot be separated from or prioritised over another. As such, it is a reimagining of approaches to studies of class against the backdrop of discourses about 'networked individualism' - the idea that traditional social groups have dissolved, and individuals are instead loosely connected through personal networks enabled by digital technologies.

Twelve interviews were conducted with first-generation undergraduate students and graduates based in India, about their experiences with and usage of social media. The choice of first-generation students was made to stand in for individuals with experience/history of (upward) social mobility, and social mobility and social media were both chosen as two of the

key concepts to strengthen the neoliberal context that this study is situated in. The interviews had a narrative element to it and revolved around how social media intertwined with experiences during education, subsequent careers, and current life-worlds. The interviews were thematically analysed, following a mostly inductive methodology, but drawing from previous literature to draw an overarching theme.

The next section details a brief review of the literature around class and class identity, the impact of neoliberalism, and processes of reflexivity and positionality that individuals undertake. Followed by this, the research questions and a conceptual framework to answer them is presented. The methodology and research design of the project are elaborated on, and the results and analysis are discussed. Finally, a conclusion is offered, discussing the answers to the research questions, and what further research should build on.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Class and Class Identity

Different approaches have been adopted to the study of class relations, from the study of occupational class and social mobility (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1993; Bonney, 2007) to the study of cultural processes surrounding class, often drawing on Bourdieu's conceptual framework (Skeggs, 2004; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). This shift from traditional class analysis to more culture and individual-focused approaches came into being against the backdrop of the debates about the "end of class" (Beck, 2007) due to rapid changes in employment. The composition of the working class was transformed by the neoliberal economic and social policies in various parts of the world in the 1980s and the 1990s, initiating a rise in the number of managerial and service positions. Theorists (Crompton, 2010; O'Neill and Wayne, 2018) understand these debates as being about the end of class consciousness, as against the end of class itself. Approaches 'beyond the economic' have been suggested to better understand inequalities (Scott, 1996; Gibson-Graham *et al*., 2000), influenced by Bourdieu's approach of studying economic as well as cultural (symbolic) forms of inequality.

These cultural aspects of class also bring into focus, the concept of 'status'. While Burrows and Gane (2006) have argued that class and status are now indistinguishable (2006: 805-6), status has been theorised by Becker *et al*. (2017) as expressions of social class that help create and maintain boundaries of social class. According to Bourdieu, individuals create a unique habitus comprising of habits, dispositions and orientations that is communicated through social space (Bourdieu, 1979/84). They create class-specific spaces through their lifestyle reflecting social status and different levels of social, cultural and economic capital (Becker *et al*., 2017).

These concepts of status and lifestyle gained more currency after the cultural turn as economic inequalities superimposed on more cultural issues (Fraser, 2000). Crompton (2010) compares this to the way debates about structural inequalities were overtaken by individualist ideas in public discourse. The notion of the 'optimising individual' (Becker, 1996) and the conception of workers as individuals who 'rent out' their labour (Wright and Sorenson, 2000) serves to normalise class inequalities which are further encouraged by individualist discourses of meritocracy, neoliberalism and postfeminism. These individualist discourses frame working or lower-classness as something to aspire to leave behind (Reay, 2005), contributing to the invisibility of class through biological and cultural essentialism (Skeggs, 2004).

Class identity has been conceptualised through class-based practices and accounts of practices (Savage, 2000), and through how individuals think and feel about these practices (Reay, 2005). Reay calls this the 'psychic realm of social class,' stressing on the affective aspects of class. O'Neill and Wayne (2018) call the shift of moral values from the collective sphere onto the individual a hegemonic struggle conducted by neoliberalism. Andrew Sayer (2005) in 'The Moral Significance of Class' writes about shame, guilt, and defensiveness of varying degrees that characterise different class positions. Feminist work that advocates the analysis of these affective and moral responses of class as a part of the larger social picture (Reay, 2005; Skeggs, 1997/2002, 2004) theorises class in everyday social practices and interactions. Moore et al (2018) argue for a more culturally differentiated model of class, stressing the possibilities that digital media and other cultural practices offer for self-determination to avoid functionalism. Thus,

practices of classification, experience and positioning are indicative that social class works in an interaction between the psyche and the social (Skeggs, 2004).

Skeggs' (2004) conceptualises class as struggles over value, or 'person-value', while Tyler (2015) argues, "The sociology of class should be grounded not in the assumption and valorisation of class identities, but an understanding of class as struggles against classification." Even in class analysis, Wright argues for restoring the central position of exploitation to accommodate the historical reality of capitalist class relations, defining classes as "positions within the social relations of production derived from these relations of exploitation," (Wright, 1984). Material historic perspectives attempt to denaturalise class (Dorling, 2018), situating the study of class and class identity in the context of an international capitalist political economy.

Neoliberalism

The rise of financial capitalism and its replacement of industrial capitalism has led to decomposing class identities (Typer, 2015). People don't necessarily identify with existing social classes and the term 'working class' has eroded as a political identity as well as a sociological category. Class disidentification has been correlated with hegemonic discourses that stigmatise poverty, thus, creating pressures to disassociate from one's roots in poverty and to blame "the poor" for poverty and pathologising working classness (Gewirtz, 2001; Shildrich and MacDonald, 2013; Paton, 2014). The middle classes have been suggested to be at once, the elite as well as 'everybody' (Ray and Baviskar, 2011), especially because of the popularity of the term for self-identification in India. The term is used with much casualness in academic as well as political discourse, signalling both the cultural capital and popular currency it signifies, as against the label 'working-class' or even 'lower class,' which are not as readily appropriated by individuals. The idealisation of the middle-class in India has direct roots in the hierarchical caste relations embedded in the fabric of the Indian society, ostracising the lower and working-class identity, although it is sometimes referred to as the 'middle classes' for the sake of plurality. This 'new' middle class has been theorised to be discursively

created (Fernandes, 2006) and its position in the 'middle' of the social hierarchy has been questioned through both economic as well as sociological lenses (Deshpande, 2003).

Social class, however, has not disappeared. Inequality continues to be a feature of modern society, and classificatory struggles have only intensified (Tyler, 2015). Bourdieu's (1979/1984) 'Distinction' is a post-Marxist study of class hierarchies and a demonstration of how class formation is a process of the cultural domain in liberal democracies. This understanding of symbolic and cultural capital is further extended by the "cultural class analysts" (Atkinson, 2020: 10) such as Skeggs (1997/2002, 2004), Reay (1998), Savage (2000).

Skeggs' (2004) conceptualisation of class as struggles over 'person-value', is supplemented by Brown's (2006: 16) argument that culturalisation of political struggles by depoliticisation of the sources of political problems is a key characteristic of neoliberalism. Thus, Neoliberalism plays an ideological role in society, by hiding the political and embedding itself in the cultural, through processes of meaning-making.

While a working-class identity has been decomposed by Neoliberalism, new identities are composed and held to standards, and the struggle continues. Skeggs (2011: 502) understands the middle classes as individualised, flexible subjects - the ideal subjects of Neoliberalism against whom classed-others are judged in the social imaginary (Tyler, 2015). "Public humiliation of people for their failure to adhere to middle-class standards in speech or appearance would have been considered offensive, discriminatory or prejudicial [in the post-war period]," as claimed by Robbie (2005: 100).

In Neoliberalism, class inequalities are reconfigured to be consequences of individual agency as against structural inequalities (Reay *et al*., 2005; Zipin *et al*., 2013), and one's position in the social hierarchy is either 'earned' or 'deserved' due to their own deeds (Tyler, 2015). Thus, Neoliberalism is a "new moral system that subverts and reorients us to its truths and ends," (Ball and Olmedo, 2012: 88, see Sayer, 2005), through representations that contribute significant towards identity-construction (Tyler and Bennett, 2010), such as the representations of 'publicly immoral' working class youth (Skeggs, 2002, 2005)

Garth Stahl (2015: 3) in her study of the construction and expression of working-class boys' identities in relation to hegemonic conceptions of masculinity and their schooling experience, considers identities and subjectivities to be in a 'process of becoming,' contesting and adopting, resisting and aspiring. She quotes Allen's (2013) definition of aspiring as, "a relational, felt, embodied process, replete with classed desires and fantasies, defences and aversions, feelings of fear, shame and guilt, excitement and desire." Aspiration for upward mobility is thus the moral prescription for classed-others in pursuit of 'person-value,' respectability and authenticity (Skeggs, 1997/2002; McDowell, 2003; Dolby and Dimitriadis, 2004).

Reflexivity and Articulation, Positionality and Performativity

Thus, constraints or opportunities of class and deep-seated emotional frameworks that help individuals to make sense of their realities shape life trajectories. While Goldthorpe and Chan consider class to have little to do with cultural consumption (Chan and Goldthorpe (2007a, 2007b), in the social space, individuals are differentiated according to the overall composition of the economic or cultural capital they possess, incorporating status into the wider definition and manifestation of class and bringing the concept closer to lived experiences of class (Sayer, 2005: 77).

Social class can be gauged in various ways (Côté 2011), often operationalised as status. People tend to relate wealth with competency, eliciting feelings of admiration for the wealthy (Fiske *et al.*, 2002). Other non-verbal cues such as photos of people's living rooms (Davis, 1956), photos of people's shoes (Gillath *et al*., 2012) as well as verbal cues such as accents of the speakers (Giles and Sassoon, 1983; Kraus *et al.*, 2017) have been operationalised as indicators of class and status. Previous research has shown that different signalling tactics such as a speaking in a 'high-class accent' or displaying luxury goods (Nelissen and Meijers, 2011) and clothing (Piacentini and Mailer, 2006), including on social media (Becker, Kraus and Rheinschmidt-Same, 2017) are employed by people to signal their preferred social class identity. Propagating the 'individualisation of class' thesis, Savage (2000) emphasises that while class in itself has become invisible, perceptions of a 'good' career are shaped by the

differentials between habitus of different classes, dictating the embodied dispositions that are necessary to achieve the successful career and life trajectories, as against the "negative foil" that the lifestyle of the dominated serves as (Bourdieu 1984: 57).

These specific negative and positive class-related reference points are testaments to the importance of cultural capital and these ideological positions are founded on history of symbolic (and physical) violence, what Sennett and Cobb (1972) called 'the hidden injuries of class identity.' While how the habitus generates conscious thought alongside conditioned intentions is not elaborated systematically (Boudon, 1998), the production of subjectivity involves positioning oneself in relation to these inclusive and exclusive practices to create a sense of belonging (Davies and Harre, 1990).

Bourdieu's framework has offered opportunities to reflect on the moral dimensions of class (Sayer, 2005) and it's impacts on self-worth, or 'person-value' (Skeggs, 2004), while inspiring deeper analyses of relational aspects of identity based on articulations of similarity and difference and the reproduction of inequality through this differential control over forms of capital (Lareau, 2003; Devine, 2004). The relational view of class offered by Bourdieu's concept of the social space impresses on individuals, a subconscious learning process, inscribing the scope of limitations of the world onto the habitus in the form of "a feel for the game," - a set of reasonable aspirations fed into the habitus, much of which are incorporated in childhood. According to this, agents attempt to improve or maintain position in social space through optimisation strategies, converting capital from one form to another (Bourdieu, 1979/1984: 125).

Thus, the habitus is "the integration of past experiences" (1977: 83) and "the active presence of the past" (1990: 56). It is, according to Bourdieu, both generative and reproductive, consisting of both, the process of articulation of a class identity and the work of class positioning in social interactions guided by these optimisation strategies (Danielsson, 2021). The system of similarities and differences dictates the nature of these interactions, including who people are likely to form relationships with (Bourdieu, 1979/1987; McNay, 2008), providing them their social identity (Bourdieu, 1991: 234).

While conscious agency and individual biographical experiences remain inadequately theorised in Bourdieu's framework (Atkinson, 2010), many constructions are appropriated by agents as linguistic remnants of past symbolic struggles, including labels such as 'metrosexual,' 'bougie,' etc. Aguiar's (2011) processes of aestheticisation of everyday life (performativity, narrativization of self, body as practice, fragmentation, the role of image, and prosthetics) which are based in implicit class-related assumptions offer a useful framework to understand this appropriation. While individuals are increasingly expected to work on themselves, as seen in the conceptualisation of humans as 'renting' their labour, constantly optimising themselves to ensure they are not optimised by someone else (Skeggs, 2004), they are also expected to perform this work (Sauter, 2013). Wee and Brooks (2010) call this the 'branding imperative' expected of reflexive individuals.

There are two schools of thought about the practice of reflexivity, one understanding it as the cause of specific courses of action and diverse life trajectories in the midst of individualisation. Proponents of this "individualisation thesis" (Atkinson, 2010) include Ulrich Beck (1994, 2007) and Zygmunt Bauman (1982, 2001), who use the term 'individualisation,' as well as postmodernists such as Anthony Giddens (1991, 1994, 1995) who talks of the "reflexive project of the self," and Margaret Archer (2000, 2003, 2007) who speaks of the 'spread of autonomous reflexivity,' (Atkinson, 2007a, 2007b, 2010). These theorists write about the transportation of society from older, collective models of social organisation to one with more individualised, reflexive identities, actively thinking and choosing how to live. Beck argues that individuals are freed from "historically prescribed social forms and commitments," (Beck, 1992: 128) in the post-industrial society and are compelled to produce their own biographies. This is so because of the institutions of the industrial society, which cater to "the individual as actor, designer, juggler and state director of his or her own biography, identity, social networks, commitments and convictions," (Beck, 1997:95). Against the same backdrop, the question then, for Bauman, is not about finding a place in the existing categories and classes, but about which identity to choose and how to stay on guard in case this identity needs to be abandoned and another more powerful identity be chosen (Bauman, 2001: 147). For Giddens, the narratives of self-identity now hang on a "context of multiple choice," due to globalisation and its institutions of chronic

reflexivity, and that mobility has removed the limits of capital (Giddens, 1991). Archer (2007: 61) claims that the trajectories and intentions of the "new cosmopolitans" are not those of "Bourdieu's people" because they owe little to their "backgrounds and socialisations."

The proponents of the individualisation thesis are criticised as being detached from ground realities (Goldthorpe, 2002; Marshall, 1997: 16; Savage, 2000: 105; Skeggs, 2004: 53). Goldthorpe claims that such social processes, "insofar as they are in evidence at all, turn out to be far less dramatic, far more limited and also far more cross-nationally variable than the authors in question would suppose," (2002: 20).

The other school of thought concerning reflexivity conceptualises it as the effect of continued social processes in a transformed but continued habitus. Atkinson (2010) in his study observed a degree of "normative convergence" between sections of the white and blue-collar workers, that he believes to be a transformation of the working class into a privatised collection of workers displaying a family-centered and instrumental approach to work. Myerhoff and Ruby (1982: 2) define reflexivity as, "the capacity of any system of signification to turn back upon itself, to make itself, to make itself its own object by referring to itself: subject and object fuse." Bourdieu's framework has brought to the forefront, the inseparability of cultural resources and frameworks with the foundations of choices and abilities, dictated by a habitus that functions "below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will," (Bourdieu, 1979/1984: 77). Thus, knowledge and intentions are not separate from the conditioned habitus, but "flow from it" (Atkinson, 2010: 52). Atkinson tries to reformulate Giddens' position by incorporating the tendency to 'reflexively' engage with all the choices that globalisation offers the individual with the habitus as a conditioned disposition. This position has been suggested by theorists as the 'reflexive habitus,' stressing on the ambivalent and creative nature of the habitus as one of its critical features (Sweetman, 2003).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do upwardly mobile individuals form, display or avoid a distinct class identity over social media and what forms of labour (emotional, material) are spent in this 'identity work' (Wexler, 1992)?
2. How is individuals' habitus and their reflexivity regarding social class negotiated in the neoliberal context?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research mobilises a theoretical paradigm of articulation and performance practices to study individuals' reflexivity and positionality of their class identities within an individualised context of neoliberalism and meritocracy. This theoretical paradigm of the duality of articulation and performance, fits in with the description of the habitus as both generative and reproductive by Bourdieu (also see Danielsson, 2021). It also provides a useful framework to evaluate the nature of the habitus in the lives of supposedly reflexive individuals of the neoliberal era.

This framework of articulation and performance, informed by the theoretical discussion in the previous chapter, is mobilised using the life trajectories and experiences with social media usage of individuals with a history of upward social and/or economic mobility. The rationale behind each of these choices is elaborated on in the following paragraphs.

Experience of Social Mobility

Class as an optic of sociological analysis proves to be highly beneficial to uncover various types of oppressions that exist in tandem with class. This is precisely because of the way class relations are structurally rendered invisible within capitalism and yet, are the fundamental basis of the extraction of the surplus value that capitalism is defined by (O'Neill and Wayne, 2018). As such, this study is about laying bare the numerous forms of inequalities that shape individual and collective identities through intersectionality and attempting a revision of class

analysis and its foundational epistemologies (Tyler, 2015). This is an important position to take in the study of subjectivities from the lens of media sociology, since the sociological discipline is "deeply implicated in the work of group-making" which is then "appropriated by political operators to project a falsely rationalised vision of their rule," (Wacquant, 2013:4). As such, the choice of studying the articulation and performance practices of individuals with a history of upward mobility is merely a strategy to ensure the strengthening of the neoliberal context. It is not an attempt to prioritise mobilisation for the study of social class, which can be argued to be based on a limited understanding of social change and class (O'Neill and Wayne, 2018), and is instead focused on understanding 'identity work' (Wexler, 1992) in individualised contexts of neoliberalism and meritocracy.

Specifically, first-generation university students and graduates were recruited as participants. Coupled with the strong neoliberal context that perceived social mobility provides, inclusion of the education system in the conceptual framework also benefits this study as it has been theorised to provide a social context replete with the explicit and implicit manifestations of class differentiation (Reay, 2005) and provides an opportunity to study the emotional and moral aspects of class identification (Lucey and Reay, 2000, 2002).

Articulation and Performance Practices Over Social Media

However, beyond the schooling and university environment, discursive processes of the performance of cultural capital also constitute a part of individuals' lived realities. The rationale behind the choice of social media as a ground to study identity articulation and performance is twofold - (1) the neoliberal values that abound social media discourses and (2) the branding imperative that characterises contemporary practices of positionality.

There is a compulsion to 'be yourself', an authenticity mandate in contemporary times, and authenticity is emphasised as an identity-marker in studies of class identity in neoliberalism (Mendez, 2008). Foucault's (1988: 18) notion of this production of authentic, distinctive, individualised identities using technologies is called "technologies of the self," enabling the branding of personal identity through social media and blogging practices. Other neoliberal values are also amplified over social media through discourses surrounding trends of 'hustle

culture', 'girlboss', 'pandemic productivity', etc. Nick Couldry (2010: 4) conceptualises different levels at which neoliberalism works for the creation of meaning, strengthening the case for social media to be studied as a ground for the articulation (because of the meaning-making potential of social interaction and neoliberalism) and for performance (because of the branding imperative) of social class identity.

Along with Bourdieu's framework, Reay's (2005) psychic economy of class will be mobilised to bridge the gap between habitus and reflexivity, the external action and the internal reflection, and their negotiation in the neoliberal context.

METHODOLOGY

Both research questions addressed in this study are descriptive and relate to each other in a chronological order. The first question concerns the labour of identity work, which is defined as the strategies employed by individuals to create an identity in a context that is, on its surface, different from one they grew up in. The second question is a deeper investigation into the effect of the contemporary neoliberal context on the 'habitus', a set of predispositions guided by a deep-seated framework to make sense of reality.

Due to the flexible, interactive and interpersonal nature of the long-form qualitative interview, it provides itself as the most suitable tool for the study of subjectivity and identity. The topic-focused nature of the semi-structured interview offers fluidity in content and form and renders itself the right choice to study processes of articulation of classed identities. This is due to its treatment of knowledge as contextual and meaning as co-produced (Edwards and Holland, 2013 adapted from Mason, 2002: 62).

The semi-structured in-depth interview (Berger, 1998) does come with its limitations. Interviews, not the least due to the usage of personal information and the therapeutic setting (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) that the in-depth interview offers, also offer many potential ethical dilemmas. Even when the research topic does not concern something particularly

personal, in the space of an in-depth qualitative interview that requires a certain amount of narrativity of lived experience, some unexpected distressing accounts can emerge, leaving the interviewee open to exploitation (see Finch, 1984) and eventual disillusionment and feelings of betrayal. Researchers working with this methodology must act with honesty, integrity and fairness (Kvale, 1996), ensuring no deception with regards to the goals, scope and other aspects of the study (Brennen, 2017). It is crucial to only recruit participants with their informed consent after disclosing the exact subject of the study and disclosing how the interview material will be used, and to protect each participant's identity and right to privacy and safety.

The in-depth interview privileges a certain type of respondent, and it is not always easy for people to understand the emotional framework guiding their actions. However, it is precisely this limitation that benefits the narrative aspects of the interview, because participants get an opportunity to reflect and articulate their thoughts and offer insights into the subjective process. This model of research is at odds with the traditional conception of interview research, where participants are viewed as a source of data that they voluntarily consent to give away and is instead a process that is "not simply descriptive but constitutive of the self," (Elliott, 2005: 140). It must be recognised that the narrative interview can be a crucial transformative experience and have impacts on the "self-concept" of both the interviewee and the interviewer (Day-Sclater, 1998).

While it is the interviewer's challenge to create a comfortable and safe space to elicit the best anecdotes and insights from the participant, it is especially crucial to employ the process of 'listening' in its truest sense for each interviewee. While the 'idealised' interviewee is theorised to be "well-spoken, cooperative, knowledgeable, truthful, precise, motivated, coherent and focused, providing the interviewer with great stories, lively descriptions and wonderful examples," (Kvale, 1996 in Brennen, 2017: 38), such an understanding is bound to introduce biases in the very beginning of the research process. The level of linguistic capital in research participants varies according to their different social class backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1991, see Mao and Feldman, 2019). Middle-class and working-class interviewees show significant differences in the linguistic code they draw from (Bernstein 1962) and storytelling styles they employ (Kerswill, 2007; Wodak, 1996). Thus, hesitation, a lack of coherence and knowledge

and resistance to open up are as telling and important to a research study as accounts shared by 'idealised' participants embodying cultural privilege.

It has been argued that subjectivity can be understood as the interplay between different social agents and not just an internal predisposition, what Wengraf (2011) calls "inter/subjectivity." To understand individuals' "meta-feelings" (Hochschild, 2012) - how people believe they ought to feel - regarding their subjectivity around issues of class on social media narratives function as both "organising tools as well as products of organisations".

Understanding the knowledge exchanged in a semi-structured in-depth interview as contextual helps us view narratives as reflecting the participant's identity, which is always in flux and yet, situated in the socio-historical contexts of the participants, "part of a larger whole," (Freeman, 2012). Thus, narratives can be viewed as conversational demonstrations of discourse (Suoto-Manning, 2014). As such, the analysis of interview data to study processes of articulation and performativity of class identities can benefit from both thematic and critical-narrative analysis (Suoto-Manning, 2014), a methodological combination of narrative analysis with critical discourse analysis. Due to time constraints and word count limitations, thematic analysis was chosen as analysis methodology. The analysis of the interviews draws from the 'grounded theory' tradition (Glaser and Straus, 1968), that follows a process of 'induction', examining all the observed themes to study the theory suggested through them. While qualitative sociological research is often inductivist, it can be deductivist in certain moments, such as the combination of 'loose' and 'tight' thinking suggested by Bateson.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were informed about the study through an information sheet covering details of the project, participants' involvement and their right to withdraw. Consent was obtained through a consent form. In the initial three interviews, it was observed that participants were unclear about the topic of study and sought clarification during the online meeting. With a move away from naturalistic studies towards

constructivism, explaining the research question and the nature of the research becomes more complex (Elliott, 2005). This was addressed through revisions of the information sheet, making them clearer and adding the theoretical basis of the study to the information sheet, as it was observed that participants were interested in learning how their experiences would be placed within a theoretical field.

As mentioned in the Methodology section, narrativity is an important aspect of the qualitative interviews. As such, the first part of the interview consisted of participants narrating their life journey, followed by a semi-structured interview about themes that the topic guide was organised around. This choice of adding a narrative element to the interview was based on the understanding that narratives are particularly central to the maintenance of the hegemony, as observed by Elliott (2005). This is the case due to the chronological aspect of the narrative, which leads to assumptions of causality between events (Chatman, 1978, as quoted in Elliott, 2005).

Although theoretical sampling was not employed, participants recruited for the study came from a wide range of backgrounds, throwing light on the various oppressions that exist in tandem with class, making a strong case to study class from the perspective of the 'identity work' that surrounds it. Class is a differentiation that is produced relationally, where each class is the 'other' to the Other (Sayer, 2000). Thus, it is not possible to separate class from other identity markers and instead needs to be studied from a perspective that emphasises relationality, interdependence and vulnerability (Evans *et al*., 2017) among individuals. While dealing with identity politics, researchers often briefly acknowledge aspects of identity such as race, gender, class but fail to acknowledge how the data and conclusions were impacted by the participants' positionality or exclude considerations of identity altogether from their studies (McKorkel and Myers, 2003).

Sampling was conducted according to Robinson's four-point approach to sampling (2014). As such, the sample universe was first-generation undergraduate students or graduates between the ages of 18-32 from India, to stand for upwardly mobile individuals, socially and/or economically. The sample size was decided to be 12 due to practical considerations, such as

time limitations and the difficulty in finding interviewees that met the criteria for participation, and the sampling strategy was convenience sampling. Existing networks were mobilised over social media and messaging apps for sample sourcing, however, most of the participants were recruited after mobilising secondary or tertiary networks. This difficulty with participant recruitment was observed because the communication strategy for sample sourcing had to be revised many times, due to cultural and linguistic barriers. The communication materials were translated into Hindi and Marathi, while some keywords such as 'first-generation' student were also clarified. 'First-generation' as a term is not a common part of spoken discourse in India, and people in existing networks expressed hesitation in asking their acquaintances if they were first-generation learners in their families. Thus, access and negotiation of the field was a challenge, especially because of the researcher being based abroad, but perseverance and an iterative process of embedding feedback from peers and other researchers in the sample sourcing process proved to be helpful.

The semi-structured interview was aided by a topic guide that underwent multiple revisions based on results of initial coding. The final draft of the topic guide was guided by three ideas.

The guide was divided into seven major sections to facilitate discussion in depth – (1) An introductory section where the participant was asked to introduce themself and narrate their life trajectory, the way they wished. This was followed by questions under the categories of (2) Differences; (3) Relationships and Relationship-formation; (4) Ambitions; (5) A Word-association Task, discussing their definitions of 'Modernity', 'Authenticity', 'Distinctiveness', and 'Taste'; (6) Education, Work and Working Conditions; (7) Travel, Hobbies, News and Culture. All themes employed general questions, as well as questions about the role of social media in each context, along with a separate question about the participant's relationship with social media.

The questions further into the interview were worded, and in some cases omitted, based on the initial narratives offered by the participants. This was a conscious consideration to avoid normalising middle-class values as a given, through researcher reflexivity, and instead ask questions that helped position the discussion in the participants' own context.

The researcher wished to understand the 'work' put in by the participant in constructing their own identity and performing it, so particular emphasis was placed on understanding the participants' motivations and the subsequent emotional, physical and other labour spent on this 'identity-work'.

Participants' comments at the end of the interview signified the role of the narrative interview as a therapeutic as well as constructive process, and they expressed appreciation of an opportunity to share their life experiences and to also make sense of it themselves.

The interviews were recorded to the cloud over Zoom, and a research data management plan was created using the university's online data management planning tool. The study received ethics approval from the university's ethics committee, and the researcher ensured privacy of all participants by completing the university's cyber security awareness course, through protection of online data, and anonymisation. The interviews conducted in English were transcribed using Zoom's live transcription feature, and interviews conducted in Hindi and Marathi were transcribed and translated by hand.

The interviews were thematically coded using an inductive approach to coding. First, six code categories were created based on the sections in the topic guide. Under the code categories of (1) Feelings of exclusion/difference; (2) Relationships; (3) Motives/Ambition/Inspiration; (4) Ideals/"Common Sense"; (5) Sharing/Communication; and (6) Hobbies/Culture, twenty-three codes were distributed.

After coding all interviews, thirteen basic themes were identified. A recurring code was considered to be a basic theme if it occurred in 1/3rd of the sample, so in the responses by at least 4 out of 12 participants. The basic codes were organised into a 'thematic network' (Attride-Stirling, 2001) consisting of basic themes, more abstract themes called organising themes and the principal metaphor as a global theme.

RESULTS, DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

From the coding process, six organising themes were observed - (1) Negotiated Narratives of Oppression; (2) Labour of Identity Work; (3) Dual and Dislocated Relationship with the Home; (4) Person-value versus Symbolic Violence; (5) Shame and Fear of Identity Work; and (6) Resentment/Upward Contempt. These were observed to come together into a global theme signifying aspiration for mobility to be a disposition of the dominated habitus.

Negotiated Narratives of Oppression

To understand the experience of mobility, participants were asked about differences they noticed and felt, during their college years and beyond. In this section, many participants also shared feelings of difference and exclusion since childhood, helping the researcher understand the habitus they grew up in. This organising theme involves basic themes of participants' feelings of difference in educational and financial contexts, combined with a negotiated narration of these differences.

Sometimes, this negotiation was indicated by combining accounts of oppression and exclusion with disclaimers that things were "not as bad," or saying they were the lucky ones. The following quote by Saili reveals this duality in the narrative:

> Saili: So, I've always known that we are comfortable, okay, so we've always been a comfortable family. And when you're around your own family, you don't really care about it, you know. But once you get out of that, and when you're, like, in a social peer group, you just see people, and they're like, 2 vacations every year, and my dad just bought me a Tommy Hilfiger watch, and like a matching bag... and I never was the jealous type, but, at the same time there is this small part in you, it's always like, oh, I wish I had nice things as well. But it was not like I did not have nice things, I was just like, I wish I had nice-er things, so that there was always that component, but you know what? My parents didn't make me feel like I had anything less or anything more. I always had everything that everybody was having. But private school can be a bitch because you have people from various different backgrounds.

In other cases, participants offered these negotiated narratives by acknowledging the experiences of oppression, but also thanking the adversity for shaping their current selves. This is demonstrated by the following quotes by Darshan. The first quote is from the very

beginning of the interview when he recounted his schooling years and the bullying he faced from his teachers, and the next came a little later in his narration:

> Darshan: My name is Darshan and I'm a graphic designer, like other than being the designated idiot, you know? So that's something I like to call myself, because that's something I've been all my life, like I've just been a very thick person... As far as I remember, I've never been the intelligent kid. I've been a smart kid, a clever kid, the wiseass, the dumbass, but I've not been the intelligent kid. I've never had, uh, great grades, you know. And it was always a struggle to keep up, and I honestly don't know how I managed to hold on those three years... those three horrible years of my childhood, right?

> Darshan: Like I recall my childhood... even though it was not horrible, it was not traumatising, it was just difficult... and without those key skills, I don't really think I could have become the person [that I am]... that I'm doing something I'm passionate about and all of that, right?

Reay (2005), exploring the affective aspects of class through educational case studies, noted that working class students who aim for elite universities juggle a barge of negative emotions alongside positive ones, that their middle-class peers experience. In the study of young people's subjectivity, an influence of 'push' and 'pull' factors is advocated for (Stahl, 2015: 33) to study the interpellation of subjectivities.

The Labour of Identity Work

The second organising theme combines the various strategies adopted to overcome these differences and to carve a place for oneself in the changed social sphere. A large number (7/12) of participants reported having to work part- or full-time alongside education, and many of them continue to work multiple jobs after graduating.

Vikrant, a political journalist and first-generation Dalit Christian individual who travelled abroad for graduate school, recounts working 7-8 hours in the night to afford his living expenses, which were not covered by the scholarships that covered his academic fees. While speaking about his motivation for work, he mentions:

> Vikrant: Everybody says I'm a journalist because I'm passionate about journalism. I would say in my case, I am passionate about it no doubt, otherwise I wouldn't have been in this space, but at the same time, I'm also working for a paycheck... I would never let go of anything [work] that comes my way, I would pull my socks and work extra.

Saili also shares her learnings from trying to afford the same lifestyle as her peers, saying:

> Saili: It just made me realise how important money is in life and how nothing in this world works without money and you know how people say that I will always choose love over money and I'm like no, you're wrong. It's always money, money, money. I believe in everything that is good that love has to offer, but nothing in this world works without money... I have realised that I work for money and not because I find actual pleasure in the work. At least that's what my bar job has taught me.

Participants also mention other coping strategies such as managing their social anxiety and taking efforts to improve confidence, learning English, building professional connections, exploring more about pop culture, and trying to carve a niche personality. However, this identity work that participants engage in to adapt to difference and exclusion comes with costs to incur. Darshan shares how he manages building professional networks through social media in the early phase of his career while also taking care of his emotional health:

> Darshan: Connected, yeah, everyone's connected everywhere. WhatsApp, Instagram. But do I care about them? Fuck no. I don't really know the right term for it, but I can't really... afford, emotionally, I can't afford that.

Dual and Dislocated Relationship with Home

One of the basic themes observed throughout the sample was that parents were particularly passionate about formal education for their children and acted as support systems and did everything in their power to ensure 'good' education for their children. However, another basic theme observed was a difficult relationship with parents and community "back home," especially in the case of participants who came from the most marginalised backgrounds. This is an example of how "class sense frequently coagulated into a perception of sharp, dividing lines and a feeling of existing in separate 'worlds' or 'realities' from others removed in social

space, contextualising moments of life, characterised by discomfort, disjuncture and crushed self-esteem," in Atkinson's (2011: 155) study of class amongst theories of individualisation.

Vikrant's parents believed that he had gone on the "wrong path" because of getting educated, while Farhan's family members fear that he will "start doing wrong things" if he studies more. He also admitted to not being on good terms with his father anymore due to differences in religious and political views, and that his father blames his education for it:

> Farhan: My father says that you've studied a lot because I say all this. He says how can I go against my religion like this? I believe everyone has that personal freedom to believe in that. That is why I don't put my opinion on social media because a lot of my friends have different opinions.

Person-value vs Symbolic Violence

Many participants pursued education for gaining respect from society (8/12), alluded to through different terminology and assumptions. For Saili's parents, this was about sending her to private schools because they tend to have "good people, with good values," while Farhan narrates a disturbing incident at the local government office as his motivation to pursue higher education.

> Farhan: I was very angry, and I felt helpless as they treated me like a nobody from a village. I could not go anywhere to even complain. I was very angry that night as he insulted me in front of everyone by saying that you village people do not keep your documents properly and so on. I realised I cannot let this pass by. After doing some research of what I could do to make sure nobody else had to go through that, I realised that my only option is to become a bigger officer, for which I would have to finish my bachelors.

A third of the participants (4/12) confessed to feeling disconnected from India, expressing disappointment in the education systems, feeling that patriotism is just a "momentary lapse in judgement," or starting to feel unsafe in the country's increasingly communal environment. This was expressed as one of the motivators for them to pursue further education abroad in the coming years, if it was found feasible. Vikrant, narrating his return to India after his graduate programme, said:

> Vikrant: Honestly, I never wanted to come back to India, the kind of country that it's become. I feel like we are hurling down the path of a civil war.

Some participants also shared their major ambition to create their own forms of capital, either economic, social or cultural. Yash emphasised the value of earning his own money and the experiences that would open to him, while Shalini, sharing her experience of being a first-generation learner in a Muslim orthodox family, spoke about her desire to gain her own social capital:

> Shalini: I do come from a quite privileged background, but what mattered to me was that education was seen as a means to garner respect, or you can call it social standing, right? So, I was very sure that I wanted to carve my own identity and not always associate my name or be known as my father's daughter.

These basic themes of pursuing education to gain respect, feeling a disconnection from India due to increasing hate in the country, and a desire for social and economic capital to create an identity that is respected for itself, can be grouped together into an overarching organising theme about the struggle of creating person-value against decades of symbolic (and physical) violence.

The Shame and Fear of Identity Work

Many participants reported not feeling comfortable sharing updates about their achievements, travels, etc. over social media due to the fear of being judged, while some others reported not feeling a need to share what happens in their lives with others, and a few others reported feeling unsafe over social media due to increasing instances of hate speech against Muslim and Dalit individuals.

Darshan believes the charm that he tends to have in person "doesn't really translate over the internet," while Farhan shares that he "hates to show-off." As for participants who admitted to actively posting content, they displayed strategies such as heavily tailoring their posts to get the highest number of likes or posting regular updates about their life on a separate, private "spam" account, that is only open to close friends who participants felt safe expressing themselves to.

> Yash: The other account is for the trivial things, just things to spam, because that's the level of comfort... I mean these are the people that I think won't judge me, and even if they do... I mean it's a private account, and they choose to follow it.

Hesitation also accompanied identity work in aspects of life other than social media. Vikrant mentioned doing his graduate school application process as a complete secret, only sharing it with one other person who had a similar life trajectory of steep upward mobility, while Deepika narrated approaching an acquaintance over social media about applying for universities abroad, but then barely asking any questions:

> Deepika: So, I do not like asking for help, as a person, because I feel like I'm intruding. I would just go through my life saying, I do not need help. I can live. I can do what I want. I will not ask anybody for help. I will not be a burden.

Successful working class students continue to feel embarrassment and shame (Reay, 2005). The shame of reaching for a goal and failing to achieve it, as well as the fear of not being able to do it well haunt relationships of the working class with education (Plummer, 2000). This shame is also not purely academic – it is deeply implicated in the holistic person-value of the individual (Reay, 2005). As such, shame associated with identity work also showed up in the form of a need for being different, indicating a deeper emotional framework that equates person-value with distinctive achievement.

> Saili: I was doing a bachelor's in microbiology and chemistry, and according to my mother, it was the most basic thing that I could ever do, like she would say, 'Every bored housewife has done a bachelor's in microbiology and then gone on to marry an old man and then pop his fucking children. What is so different about you? What are you going to make of it?'

Resentment / Upward Contempt

Lastly, a recurring basic theme of upward contempt (Sayer, 2005), that is, resistance to symbolic domination through resentment towards those in the dominant group, was observed. This was expressed via a range of emotions from 'fomo' (fear of missing out), envy triggered by LinkedIn posts of promotion and graduation to a preference for alternative ideas of productivity that resist hegemonic standards of person-value in a capitalist society. Subodh

is a graduate student in Computer Science from Mumbai and describes himself as coming from a 'generally comfortable family.' While sharing about the travel posts that show up on his Instagram explore page, he says:

> Subodh: They [travel bloggers] give me fomo… because I know it's going to make me feel bad, because they're there and I'm not, and they're getting paid to be there.

Riya is a Human Resources professional pursuing a part-time MBA alongside her work. She is well-respected and liked in her workplace, she engages positively with everyone in her social media network, and her parents and siblings are extremely proud of everything she has achieved.

> Riya: (while talking about pandemic productivity posts) I rather like the productivity content that emphasises you to focus on yourself and drink water and tells you that you are enough.

Vikrant, on the other hand, expresses feelings of anger, envy and resentment, while sharing that he used to miss out on social events during graduate school, as he would have to work to support his living:

> Vikrant: Even I felt unfair, wronged, when I was not able to participate in all those gala events, because I would have to quickly get back to work and, I would have such a terrible time, washing piles of dishes, because most of them (co-workers) were Europeans, and I was this Indian guy, who used to be given all the cleaning... and you know, it used to be biting cold, and I used to just be standing and cleaning for six to eight hours, so it wasn't... I didn't feel good at all. I mean there were times when I would think like, why, why do I have to do this? I had a job, and I could have done something in Hyderabad, you know. Why should I have to do it?

The rise of the 'McJob' (Brown, 2013) - working-class positions that increasingly require working-class men to "learn to serve," (McDowell, 2003) - contributes to stripping 'working-class males of their image of themselves, and change their image in the eyes of others,' (Winlow, 2001: 44).

Based on Bourdieu's concept of field (1993) and Sayer's moral aspects of social class (2005), Reay (2005) maps a 'psychic economy of class'. In this conception, the working classes are constituted by a combination of anger, envy, resentment and pride in their solidarist members, and a mixture of shame, envy and civility in their more individualist members. This distinction among the dominated helps us understand the different ways participants in this study resist symbolic domination, understanding Subodh's and Riya's individualist choice of resistance stemming from envy and civility as against Vikrant's solidarist anger, envy, resentment and pride.

REFLEXIVITY AND THE LABOUR OF CLASS IDENTOTY WORK AS A PREDISPOSITION OF THE HABITUS

Position in the field works in tandem with one's past – 'Trajectory, whether one of social stasis or movement, is always a compounding factor,' (Atkinson, 2010: 179). As observed in this study, the reflexive modernity thesis, advocated for by Beck, Giddens, Blauman, Archer and others fails to account for the continued existence of the habitus by way of the many negotiated accounts of oppression; the feelings of shame, fear and resentment that accompany aspiration; the continued connection of person-value with dispositions embedded in the habitus and reinforced by symbolic violence; and the labour of class identity work that is a predisposition of the dominated habitus.

These are aspects that were embedded within the early lifeworld (Bourdieu, 1979/1984: 439-40) to make sense of life events. Atkinson (2010) compares the habitus to a mathematical formula, processing the inputs of changing social contexts, with a probability of producing infinite outcomes according to the input context. Thus, what is the creativity of the habitus to make possible new dispositions is also the predisposed nature of the habitus. However, new experiences that are 'reflexively' incorporated into the habitus would still be interpreted according to the existing perceptual schemata of the habitus. Moreover, the reflexivity mandate implicitly promoted by Beck, Blauman, Giddens, Archer and others, coupled with

the branding imperative of contemporary times, ensures that the 'reflexive reinvention' of the habitus becomes an attribute of the dominant viewed by the dominated as a positive reference point, a projected aspiration and continues to inflict symbolic violence.

If aspiration is an embedded disposition of the dominated habitus, the labour of class identity work is understood by the dominated individual through reflexivity. To view reflexivity as a resource only tapped into by those with the cultural capital to articulate and perform it for the dominant contributes to invalidating the legitimacy and epistemology of the dominated, and pegs their identity on the intelligence of the dominant.

While Deepika aspires to pursue a graduate degree abroad due to an unfavourable experience with education in her home country and Saili's struggle concerns keeping up with the lifestyle of her peers as an international graduate student, Farhan reflects on his educational aspirations in a very different way:

> Farhan: My father is saying that I can't continue my studies, I should do some business as there is no scope in education. First, I was interested but later I saw it practically, that I have come from a village and I need to settle down fast. I have a lot of problems going on right now and I don't know what tomorrow holds for me. There's a good possibility that I don't pursue a master's degree.

Vikrant, despite coming from one of the most marginalised backgrounds in the sample, managed to earn a graduate degree from a 'prestigious' international institution, very articulately summarises a reality that is scarcely different from the one he grew up in:

> Vikrant: Currently I carry the same struggle, I mean, in a different form.

Skeggs (2004) asks a crucial question that is at the heart of this issue - The authorship of one's identity – is it a mobile, exchangeable resource for everyone? However, I would like to rephrase this question to instead ask how mobile and exchangeable is the authorship of one's identity, for different individuals? Can the subaltern speak, or is the subaltern heard, and is one subaltern more likely to be heard than the other?

One might be tempted to assume, based on the responses from this study, that the differentiation between the solidarist and the individualist members of the dominated classes that Reay (2005) talks about, is founded in the intensity of marginalization and steepness of the curve of mobility. However, we must realise that identity work is a complex process and needs its own theoretical frameworks that respect intersectionality. While generalisability is a crucial indicator of the reliability of research, generalised categories of middle and working class, dominant and dominated, etc. need to be critically explored in detail to question our own assumptions, provide due respect to different epistemologies and understand complex subjective processes of individuals shaped by various social phenomena.

CONCLUSION

This study uncovers the various forms of labour spent by individuals in creating and upholding a class identity in a neoliberal world, and how their reflexivity is negotiated in an individualised society that upholds an ideological expectation of aspiration. However, the study also has its own limitations that further studies should seek to eliminate. Studying social media as a field for identity work privileges a certain type of respondent, even though this study has tried to understand individuals' identity work in various arenas alongside social media. Further studies should also be conducted with individuals with a history of other forms of mobility, as different strategies to respond to neoliberal agendas may be observed.

Tyler (2015) summarises the contributions of Bourdieu, Brown and Skeggs to class struggles in contemporary neoliberal times as "a reminder that demands for equality are demands not only for economic or social justice but demands for redistribution within the fields of visibility and intelligibility, within which class-based inequalities are naturalised, reproduced and legitimated." This study has tried to understand individuals' reflexive processes, and the labour they put in to perform these processes in the fields of visibility and intelligibility. While it has attempted to study class identity and its many hidden injuries in the digital age, further

research needs to be conducted to investigate how exactly relations of injustice imply complex identity practices, as well as how these practices unintentionally uphold the same ideologies.

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