



FINDING HAPPINESS IN DIFFICULT TIMES: WOMEN'S SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNITIES AND THEIR STRATEGIES IN THE BACKDROP OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS IN SRI LANKA

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INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a significant platform where individuals maintain links with like-minded, similarly-placed people. (Arnold & Martin, 2016) social media groups maintained by women, for women, devoted to motherhood and homemaking are an example of such groups. These groups claim to connect women and share advice and experiences related largely to the domestic sphere. Although blogs and websites devoted to these purposes were prevalent in the west from the early 90's onwards, the visibility and the prevalence of such on-line communities in Sri Lanka became more apparent with the advent of Facebook and other social media.

For the purpose of this study, I hope to observe a few prominent social media groups found on Facebook identifiable as Sri Lankan which are purportedly devoted to housekeeping, mothering and other aspects which are in traditional "gender-speak", commonly thought of as appealing to women. (Godakanda, 2019) (Siriwardhana, 2018) (Sri Lankan Mums, 2020) I hope to question the ways in which their posts impact women reading them in a global postfeminist and neoliberal backdrop. My objective in this study would be to question how women in Sri Lanka negotiate their identities as women within these social media groups in the context of challenges faced by them due to the recent economic crisis in Sri Lanka.

I intend to observe these social media groups as repositories of advice and communal knowledge, especially in their capacity to exchange advice among their members in times of recent economic challenges. Globally, research in the field of women's groups on social media is fairly recent and is developing rapidly. (Dobson, 2015) (Kanai, 2017) (Gill & Kanai, 2018) one sees the research in this domain encompassing areas such as digital intimacies, postfeminist identities as well as celebrity cultures in social media groups. "Digital intimacies" or "intimate Publics" refer to the sense of commonality or solidarity that arises between members of social media communities. In the context of Sri Lanka, where women's groups on social media are a recent phenomenon, very little research has been conducted, to date, on these groups as "intimate publics" within the digital media. (Ranaweera, 2021)

METHODOLOGY

I would like to engage in a qualitative analysis of a selected number of posts shared on or published in three selected groups on social media. Being a literary scholar, my scholarly leanings would enable me to study the writing of these communities as texts containing forms of Life Writing. In my initial investigation, I have observed recurrent patterns in the posts which were converted into themes, allowing me to do a thematic analysis.

A key question I hope to raise is whether the issues and challenges related to women and domesticity in the face of the ongoing economic crisis are seen as political and socially relevant or whether they are perceived as non-political and personal. I would be investigating whether the challenges discussed in these forums involves collective awareness and political consciousness or whether they are perceived as issues to be sorted out at a "personal" or "domestic" level.

I would be employing, as my theoretical framework, the premises suggested by a host of researchers working within women's intimate digital cultures, the notion of intimate publics, and postfeminist sensibilities.

My theoretical stance is anchored in the concept of "intimate publics" developed by Laurent Berlant (Berlant L., 2008). Informed by the work of Akane Kanai and Amy Shields Dobson on women's intimate digital cultures, (Kanai, 2017) (Dobson, 2015). I seek to relate their



speculations about young women's digital communities to the Sri Lankan women's groups that sparked my interest. I would also be looking at instances where these groups, in their capacity as repositories of advice, align themselves with the discourse of positive thinking and resilience amidst hardships.

I also hope to engage with the theorization(s) of Angela McRobbie (Notes on The Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times) (McRobbie, 2015) and Rosalind Gill (The Affective, Cultural, And Psychic Life of Post Feminism) (Gill R., 2017) (Gill R. 2007) with particular focus on the discourse of positive thinking and resilience within the lives of women occupying postfeminist cultures. Seeking to relate their speculations to my research area, I argue that the interest in surmounting the current economic challenges that is constantly featured by these groups on social media intersects with the post-feminist insistence on positive thinking and individualism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In these communities, women's role as creators of positivity and bringers of happiness is unequivocally established. It is common for women in these groups to share and "update" others on ways in which they have brought "happiness" to the lives of their families, and friends either by engaging in activities such as cooking, gardening, sewing or decorating. The group experts or the administrators claim that these activities benefit the women doing them as well as the others, as being proven to trigger "happiness or wellness hormones." These posts commonly invoke the teachings of popular happiness gurus when establishing their claims. (Siriwardhana, 2018) (Godakanda, 2019) (Sri Lankan Mums, 2020)

These posts vary in terms of the tasks displayed in them, but the spirit of "happiness-seeking" and "happiness-spreading" is pervasive. Therefore, tasks such as completed needlework, meals given (especially to others), completed gardening projects and home renovation projects are displayed as badges of merit.

This emphasis on happiness-seeking can be linked to what critics claim about a recent global movement which encourages people to strive for happiness and positive thoughts (Ahmed, 2010) (Davies, 2015).

The notion of frugality and making do with limited means is a prevalent theme in these digital communities under any circumstances as these groups are preoccupied with the domestic sphere. However, during the last two years in Sri Lanka with the financial hardships caused initially by the circumstances surrounding the Covid 19 outbreak and the financial crisis which reached a climax in 2022, this discourse has become very pervasive.

The promotion of activities such as home gardening, food preparation with limited supplies, food and fuel saving hacks and recycling became more prevalent on these digital communities as media coverage on dwindling public funds and the lack of resources in the country increased. During the food shortage during Covid 19, the groups initiated activities which encouraged women to share tips for saving food, and to prevent food wastage. Many posts were put up encouraging women to share recipes which would minimize the wastage of food or would preserve food. Both the "expert" administrators of the groups as well as the members would contribute to this discourse of frugality.

During the severe hardships imposed on households during the recent economic crisis, many posts shared by the administrators of these groups as well as members promoted "tips" and "hacks" to surmount these challenges. During the recent gas shortage which put many households into anxiety about obtaining cooking fuel, many posts displayed information on building wood fire stoves and other alternatives. Some posts sought to share knowledge on saving fuel by making suggestions about recipes that required minimum cooking time, or alternatives such as "one pot meals." At times these posts looked back at the past (or even at fictions which featured similar challenges, for instance popular translations of American pioneer fiction) for inspiration on how to live within limited means. These specific "homemaking" posts which sought to find relief for struggling household economies (with the intervention of women) largely reflect the position of women as the responsible family members for the securing of meals for the family.



Many posts call upon women to take the responsibility of feeding the family economically seriously. They almost always assume that the woman is the manager of the kitchen as well as the person in charge of kitchen stocks, indicating directly or indirectly that the husband is the major if not only wage earner in the family. Women who manage to feed the family with the limited resources afforded to them are praised and admired.

At a time when social media is inundated with posts calling people to join the protests that were taking place all over the country as a triggered result of the current political and economic crisis, the women's groups feature the effects of the economic crisis only to the extent that they were experienced within households. There would be posts inquiring about alternative modes of cooking as gas cylinders could not be secured, and information about rechargeable batteries or fans would be shared. At times concern over dwindling medicine stocks available for children would be discussed. A steady increase in posts by members inquiring about chances for immigration is also visible. Interestingly, any attempts at a politically charged dialogue are discouraged.

However, the discourse of positive thinking, as it is a key discourse visible in these groups surfaces here as well. Many posts allude to the economic crisis in terms of how homemakers can respond to it to make things better. The usual solutions such as "looking at things positively" "practicing frugality" are featured. These groups unambiguously promote home gardening and even poultry keeping and other ventures such as producing one's own oil and spices etc. Women are advised to engage in activities that make them grateful for what they have, for instance keeping a gratitude journal.

The idea that women must "think positively" during challenging times recall the power of positive thinking that was always very potent within the purview of these groups (Ranaweera, 2021). The need to think positively is ratified time and again when the current economic crisis is mentioned. This tendency could be viewed in the light of how positive thinking is linked to post-feminist and neo liberal sensibilities. Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz, in manufacturing happy citizens write about the quest of neoliberal societies to create "happy citizens." These writers speak of the contribution of certain happiness gurus to the idea that "happiness was an accurate measure of citizens' felt and perceived well-being" (Cabanas & Illouz, 2018, P. 18). They discuss the tight hold neo liberalist societies with their adulation of individuality have on the discourse of happiness. They see this strategic individualization as a convenient ploy to allow "structural deficits, contradictions and paradoxes of these societies to be rendered in terms of psychological features and individual responsibilities" (Cabanas & Illouz, 2018, P. 28).

The posts shared in these groups also call upon these women to engage in activities which will both alleviate the onslaught of the crisis on their households and also make them "happy." The prescribed activities are mostly home gardening, sharing of recipes which are better suited to frugal times, sharing of methods of food preservation, and exchanging useful information about dwindling medicinal supplies for children, and hobbies that are at once industrious and "mood-lifting."

On one hand one sees the undisputed affirmation of a woman's place vis-à-vis the "micro" economic problems that a household experiences as a result of the "macro" political-economic crisis. The affective expectation is that women seek solutions for these relatively smaller problems without grappling with the politics behind them. The idea that it is sufficient to practice frugality and economy within their respective households rather than to "blame others" and worry about "things that are beyond our control." (Siriwardhana, 2018) (Ladies only) (Sri Lankan mums)

One sees the unmistakable traces of the post-feminist insistence on resilience and courage (when faced with challenges) in the discourse of these posts. However, women, while being encouraged to be resilient are not encouraged to protest or show dissent against the conditions which created the difficulties.

This tendency could be linked to what Gill and Kanai expound in "mediating neoliberal capitalism: affect, subjectivity and inequality"; here, the writers claim that the positive thinking discourse along with qualities such as "resilience" and "creativity" often surface as a reaction to structural inequalities and flawed economic safeguards. "When rights to secure employment



and social safety nets are under continual attack, media are increasingly implicated in calling forth subjects who are “resilient,” “creative,” “flexible” and “positive” (Gill & Kanai, 2018, P. 04).

This discourse of finding solutions at an individual level is resonant throughout the posts concerning overcoming recent economic difficulties. There are many posts explaining how particular members are actually insulated against various aspects of the crisis due to “smart” decisions taken by them. Many women write about how their vegetable gardens at home or their poultry keeping has kept them from experiencing the harsh effects of the food shortage. Some women share accounts of how their family had set up a wood stove and how this had saved them from having to bear the shortage of gas. These self-congratulatory posts sometimes are seen to contrast with desperate sounding queries posted by some women who do not have these safety nets- women who have neither the time nor the facilities/ spaces for gardening and wood- stoves, for instance.

The valorization of these industrious and frugal measures at a time of economic crisis are often focused on feats of individual women. Although these social media groups operate on the ethics of solidarity, sharing and communal effort it is notable that it is individual women’s efforts and achievements (such as privately securing a wood stove or a home garden) that are ultimately validated.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Emphasis on individual performance and individual gain is seen as significant feature in post-feminist discourse. Angela McRobbie in “Notes on The Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times”, ratifies this when she suggests that “it seems then there is a battle to ensure that the new popular feminism which emerges or which holds sway is one which discards the older, welfarist and collectivist feminism of the past, in favor of individualistic striving” (McRobbie, 2015, p. 04). Rosalind Gill comments on both the strong emphasis on individualism and the dependence on affective and emotional weights such as the discourse of happiness observable in post feminism. (Gill R. , 2017)

Gill sees post-feminism “becoming increasingly dependent upon not simply an individualized register but also a psychologized one built around cultivating the ‘right’ kinds of dispositions for surviving in neoliberal society: aspiration, confidence, resilience, etc.” (Gill R., 2017, P. 610). A claim by Gill that post- feminist culture “increasingly ‘favors’ happiness and ‘positive mental attitude’, systematically outlawing other emotional states, including anger and insecurity,” (Gill R., 2017, P. 611) could be linked to how outright criticism against the political trends is discouraged within these groups. This in fact, brings us to a crucial conundrum whether there is, within these groups, an effort to depoliticize women and the challenges they face. (This was discussed in part in a previous work by the same author (Ranaweera, 2021).

I am especially intrigued by the intersections between this pressure to become “happy citizens” and post-feminist insistence on finding fulfillment through individual endeavors and how they are reflected in the narratives of the groups I hope to explore. Both neoliberal thought and postfeminist mandates favor individual gain. They both stress the importance of the individual, or as the case maybe, of individual family units. It was intriguing to note that the culture of positive thinking, resilience and individual striving (especially in times of economic challenges) which characterize the discourse of the women’s groups on social media are resonant with the neoliberal and postfeminist mandates as discussed by critics.

Although the writing on these posts appears to be supportive to women in their on-line communities and seek to enhance the quality of life of the members, a tendency to treat issues related to women as personal and exclusively domestic can be discerned. I would be particularly interested in finding out whether these posts subscribe to certain global post-feminist mandates which serve to encourage women to move away from politically conscious feminist activism and perceive domesticity as the only true fate destined for women. (Gill, R 2007) (Sandberg, S.2013) this tendency has been seen to be regressive as it seeks to depoliticize women’s struggles and to increasingly personalize them. Further research that I hope to undertake will shed light on issues related to the identity of women participating in Sri Lankan social media,



as this is a field which has not been explored before although one finds research conducted on social media groups and women in other countries, especially in the west.

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