



CULTURAL LOGIC OF JUVENILE UNDERWORLD: A STUDY ON DATA CONSUMERISM AND SELF COMMODIFICATION ON ADOLESCENT YOUTUBERS DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS

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INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka responded to COVID-19 pandemic with closing Sri Lankan airports for operation restricting entrance to Sri Lanka from overseas followed by island wide lockdowns. The past decade leading to the pandemic situation, Sri Lanka experienced the falling interest for traditional media including both broadcast and print media, against the rising interests for Social Media. The younger community including both digital natives and digital immigrants were finding it more comfortable to communicate on digital platforms. Arguably, they were attracted to its interactivity, connectivity and immediacy, in addition to its reach beyond geographical boundaries. The web 2.0 technology and digital convergence, followed by introduction of SM platforms gave the power to the individual to produce his/her own media content and reach global audiences. This phenomenon made the individual both a producer and a consumer in the context of SM platform. Hence, an individual who is active on SM can be interpreted as a prosumer with reference to this duality in SM activism. The prosumer access and activism on SM are further facilitated by SM policies that did not require its news and information to be verified. It did not have the human gatekeepers and the editorial process that could held content producers and institutions responsible and accountable for the material they produce and distribute. The gatekeepers of social media were complex algorithms utilized by social media platforms and search engines that operated independent of human intervention. These algorithm-filters selected and customized content targeting individual users to grab their attention and make them spend more time on the respective platforms. Under these conditions, prosumers were able to publish their thoughts and opinion online without considering the socio-political consequences or ethical concerns.

Rise of the Juvenile Underworld

On 30th April, 2020, traditional media stations ran a story regarding a group of children who were not related to each other, making video statements portraying themselves as members of criminal organizations. These content were reused and shared by various SM prosumers under the tagline “*Singithi Pthalaya*” meaning ‘juvenile underworld’ (Hiru News, 2020; Neth Fm Balumgala, 2020; Ada Derana, 2020). These were primary schoolers mostly in the age group of 8 to 10 years old. However, there were a few children who looked to be as young as 4 to 5 years old as well. In their videos, they threatened each other and declared themselves as the leaders of the juvenile underworld. It started with a couple of children challenging each other on social media, and later escalating as any other social media game attracting more and more contributors. When they were getting more visibility, other predatory YouTube channels reused and reproduced more material with the original content creating a noticeable hype in the local SM sphere. Subsequently, this phenomenon caught the attention of the local authorities. Consequently, with the intervention of the Police, the production of these videos was stopped and the children involved were identified and legal procedures were implemented.

Later, a child who took part in a ‘juvenile underworld’ video, made a confessional statement (02nd May, 2020) on social media explaining his ambitions and motivations for his actions. According to his statement, his lifelong ambition was to become a successful YouTuber (SLvideoHub, 2020). Furthermore, he believed that such controversial videos might give him the opportunity to boost his popularity among the social media community and subsequently



gain more viewers and subscribers to his YouTube channel. Following his confession, a social media chat-thread between the child in question and a couple of adult YouTubers were released on social media. These chats showed how these adults manipulated the child into producing these videos as a publicity stunt (SI Vlog, 2020b). Simultaneously, comments made by popular personality, Iraj Weeraratne, on his social media account endorsing the activities of these children, were also denounced by members of the social media community including YouTube vloggers (SI Vlog, 2020b). While traditional media was responsible for bringing the matter up to the authorities and taking action against the children and their parents, they did not question adult YouTubers who actually promoted these behaviours among the children, including the involvement of prominent figures like Weeraratne.

Moreover, the videos of the 4-5-year-old children also showed adult (likely parental) intervention in producing these videos. This incident revealed how deep social media and self-commodification had sunk into the social fabric of Sri Lanka. This example alone depicted how seriously young children identified YouTube as a potential career path. A decade ago, children of a similar age and class may have lean more towards the standard dreams of becoming doctors, lawyers, engineers, police officers and teachers when they grew up. This incident seems to suggest that children wished to be YouTubers even before they reached adulthood, making it a career for themselves. The irony was that contemporary media and the current technological environment had simplified it so much that it had become an achievable goal. On the other hand, there was neither a regulatory mechanism in place nor proper guidelines or guidance on content production forwarded by the state or its publics, particularly when considering child exploitation and child abuse issues surrounding the new media environment. Hence, it had become just a space where anyone could post anything as long as they were within the platform guidelines and algorithm assessments.

Data Capitalism and Digital Labour

The children, who participated in this gangster genre role play, were arguably the children who were affected by the lockdowns and isolation corresponding to the pandemic situation. During this time many parents equipped their children with mobile communication devisers as tools of teaching and learning in response to the situation. Contrarily, the power of the tool was able to wield its user to the advantage of the global capitalism. From a Marxian perspective, contemporary global capitalism, promotes individualism and causes alienation. Subsequently it feeds on consumerism and commodity fetishism of its public. Further, it pushes the individual away from the communal interdependency in to isolation and alienation. Frankfurt school thinkers argue that the culture industry and globalization further isolate the individual intoxicating their leisure time with mass media and propaganda (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002). The form of capitalism associated with the social media platforms and the web 2.0 technology can be interpreted as data capitalism. With reference to Marxian articulation of crisis of capitalism as the crisis of abundance, in data capitalism, it is the crisis of abundance of data and information (Tilakawardana, 2021). The abundance of data with reference to SM platforms is accumulated with free labour of its prosumers.

A capitalist society always considers the monetary potential of every human creation or its second nature (Marx & Engels, 1974). With reference to Marxist notion of formulating productive force through cooperation on an industrial platform (Marx & Engels, 1974), the SM platforms exhibits the potential to create and culture of its own, with the contribution of its prosumer community. Conversely, Marx believed that “the wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities’; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form” (Marx, 1990, p.125). With regard to SM, data and information that the prosumers produce can be identified as a commodity form.

When one looks at SM as data industries, and the prosumers as its digital labour, the purpose of the SM platform can be identified as, to accumulate the free labour of the prosumers as



much as possible to generate more data. This objective is achieved by the SM platforms by making its prosumers spending more time on the platform. For this purpose, SM has created a virtual world for its users to play any role they wish and deliver any message they want without verifications or gate keeping with reference traditional media. This allows its users to create a hyperreals that looks better than the real world and real self, these users experience every day. Baudrillard (1999) articulates that such self-representations transform into social actors in our online networks creating a “second, parallel world” (p.40). Subsequently, SM prosumers become commodifiable entities in a synchronic dissemination among brands and advertising as articulated by Baudrillard.

Fredric Jameson (1991) elaborates the postmodern condition as a modification of capitalism, where the real and the culture are not differentiated from each other. He illustrates postmodernism as total commodification of a society and its public. Jameson (1991) identifies this phenomenon as the cultural logic of late capitalism. Similar to the World War condition that Jameson identified as the transforming factor, it can be argued that the global pandemic situation as a transforming factor in data capitalism that expedite the digitization process, forcing people to adopt digital culture to survive crisis situation through isolations and lockdowns. Hence, it can be argued that the Jameson’s (1991) concept of imagine communities is realized through virtual digital identities of the prosumers on SM platforms. The imagine communities on SM can be identified as simulations of social processes that have become intractable with reference to Baudrillard (1999).

Culture Industry and SM Pedagogy

The SM platforms create customized hyperreals for each and every user through monitoring, analysing and accumulating the data produced by the user him/herself. The data the prosumers produce contribute to the big data repository of the platform. On one hand, the big data becomes a commodity and generate revenue for the platform and for the culture industry. On the other hand, the big data is used on the prosumer him/herself to alter and modify his/her attitude and behaviour to keep them continuously consuming the platform and its conveyances. The platforms achieve these tasks through the algorithms and corresponding big data analytics. Further, the platforms implicitly promise its prosumers fame and money simply for their online performance, without demanding any skills or expertise. The big data analytics and algorithms shape and structure the prosumer activism as per platform requirements. Arguably, the SM platforms and the algorithms manipulate data to manipulate its users. Tilakawardana (2021) illustrates that the commodification of data forces a new form of digital intervention on human behaviour benefiting data capitalism. Further, the SM platforms benefit from mass produced self-identities and self-expressions cultivated by manipulating the private spheres of their prosumers.

The testimonies of the children who took part in the juvenile underworld scenario reveal that they were driven by the SM dream to be famous and have a carrier at a younger age. Their hyperreal existence on SM has motivated them to bypass the growing up phase of the child and become an entrepreneur through a shortcut. Their objective was to produce something that could go viral and collect views, comments and subscription to gain data capital. If not for the government intervention this could have generated massive SM activism with participation of many more children. At the same time this incident shows the potential of SM to create interactive dialogue among individuals and communities with minimum technological requirements and expertise. This user friendly nature of SM and affordability of mobile devisers for the general public make it appealing as a pedagogical tool in teaching and learning circles. But the political economy behind the platforms questions the potential of it becoming more than a tool of advertising and manipulation.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding social distancing and isolation created a crisis situation that demanded sociocultural change for the survival of individuals and



communities. The availability of the digital technology and the user friendly SM platforms became a major contributor in mitigating the challenges of the crisis. But the culture industry associated with these platforms and the hyperrealities they create shows the negative attributes of globalization and data capitalism infect the social fabric of Sri Lankan communities.

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