SYMBOLIC ACTION ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND WOMAN EMPOWERMENT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Social media plays a vital role in daily lives of individuals these days. Social media platforms give chance to interact with the world virtually. One of the recent trends in such major platforms (Facebook, twitter, etc.) is about performing the symbolic action such as changing the display picture for supporting some cause. Authors, in this study, try to find out the significance of such symbolic action on social media with connection to women empowerment. Another major objective of this study is to explore the meaning of women empowerment for the youth of this generation. This study being qualitative in nature uses semi-structured interviews as tool for data collection. In-depth interviews of 18 participants were analyzed using two softwares Nvivo and R language. It has been found out that symbolic action on social media is good for creating awareness among masses. Respondents don't feel that such actions in any way ensure women empowerment. Also, it reveals that real women empowerment is when women are well informed and form an equal part of the society as men

Keywords : *Social media, Symbolic action, Social campaigns, Women empowerment*

Introduction

We live in a virtual world. Our laptops, mobile phones and tablets contain a major proportion of our activities and acquaintances. This trend of information technology has brought tremendous changes in people's lifestyles. The rise of popular social media platforms in the early 21st century such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube has changed the sharing habits entirely. This 'social media revolution' has forced almost everyone to be a part of these platforms, actively or passively. Bucy and Gregson (2001) classify citizen level expression via interactive platforms more broadly as "media participation," emphasizing that such symbolic activity is separate and distinct from material political participation. According to the authors, those who engage in media participation may "derive social and psychological rewards" such as enhancing social status and increasing a personal sense of political efficacy, although "involvement at this level typically has little direct influence over policy outcomes" (p. 373).

Participation on these platforms have many elements to it, for example, posting one's life events, one's activities, travel plans, promoting some company's / product's / event's page and also protesting

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for (or against) some cause. Twitter and Facebook have also opened the avenues of blood donation for people's ease. The reach of social media has thus become broad. People indulge in symbolic action over social media in order to show their stand for causes that concern them. A typical example of such symbolic action can be changing of display picture into a black dot/ a red equality sign/ a candle. People remove their own pictures with such substitutes to show their concern. The act of posting themed profile pictures can be assumed to contain elements of personal identity construction and impression management (echoing Bucy & Gregson's, 2001) assertion that media participation leads to rewards of enhancing social status), additional layers of motivation may also be at play. But this is still undiscovered as to how changing the display picture or other similar symbolic activities play a role in cause addressed. This paper talks of woman empowerment as an issue. Though the concept of empowerment is not specific to women, yet it is unique in that and it cuts across all types of class and caste and also within families and households (Malhotra, Schuler & Boender, 2002). Women empowerment can be defined as a change in the context of a women's life, which enables her to increase her capacity towards leading a fulfilling life. It is reflected both in external qualities (viz. health, mobility, education and awareness, status in the family, participation in decision making, and also at the level of material security) and internal qualities (viz. self-awareness and self-confidence) [Human Development in South Asia (2000) as quoted by Mathew (2003)]

This research paper addresses two basic research questions: Question1: What is the impact of symbolic action on Social media? Question 2: Can symbolic action on social media ensure Women empowerment?

Review of literature

The role of social media has been analyzed by practitioners and researchers since the advent of social media platforms. It has been studied in the context of healthcare awareness, customer empowerment, promotional campaigns of products, politics, business, communication, education, body image, etc. Its role in connection to women empowerment has been discussed but not in details. It is important to note at this point that women form a major part of the population that is active on social media. In this paper, we talk majorly about the symbolic action on social media.

According to Perrin (2015), 68% of women and 62% of men report social media usage. Social media has brought benefits to women in different ways. Odine (2013) puts forward the fact that women in the Arab World were largely excluded from full participation

in national development; also, lack of freedom of press media restricted the amount of information and news that reach them. This also affected the frequency of exchange of ideas and opinions. This scenario kept women aloof for longer time. It was possible only after the introduction of virtual media platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) that women could raise their opinions and voices. The scenario of women participation has improved manifolds due to social media platforms. Stavrositu and Sundar (2012) concluded through an empirical investigation that blogging on the social networking sites increased their psychological empowerment. They further added that social networks act as platforms where they could share their opinions and ideas. Mirani, Pannu and Malhotra (2014) suggest that ICTs (Information and Communication Technology) empower women by creating awareness through campaigns on violence against women.

"Your profile picture is similar to the top fold of a newspaper – it's often the first thing your followers see and interact with on Facebook. This can be a very powerful tool for advocating your cause if used correctly" argues Bentley (2013).

Smith (2013) argues that approximately 39% of all adults engage in political or civic activities on social networking sites, such as posting or commenting on political content, encouraging others to vote, and encouraging others to take action on political or social issues that are important to them.

Penney (2014) investigated the symbolic action of some social media users on Facebook red equal sign profile picture campaign for marriage equality which went viral in 2014. People use these symbolic actions to show their belongingness to a particular political group and also for sympathizing with people who are in need for support.

An exhaustive search of literature brought ahead the fact that symbolic actions on social media play a role similar to what speaking/ expressing an opinion in person does. A major portion of already written literature covers the area of health care and cause-related campaigns. It has never been seen individually in particular reference to woman empowerment. This paper aims to unveil this less explored area and understand how, if at all, it can ensure woman empowerment?

Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to assess whether symbolic action on social media in any way brings women empowerment. Also, it intends to find out why or why not people make these symbolic actions when asked to.

Data collection and methodology

This study could not be well framed with a quantitative approach of asking some 200 people their opinion on 5 or 7 point Likert scale as this issue is something that will involve the subjective experiences, sentiments, statements and opinions.

With regard to selection of the respondents, authors used two essential criteria. A respondent participating in the interview had to be:

i.   Active user on social media platforms
ii.   Aware of the social issues which appear on such platforms and the related actions this article talks about

Authors approached people through their own contacts and shortlisted them on the basis of a preliminary discussion on the issue. Some people (however active on social media platforms) were rejected for being final respondents of the interview, because of their lack of awareness of such trend of requirement of symbolic action on the social sites.

Tallon and Kraemer (2007) observed that while selecting the number of respondents for interview, one has to look at the new insights derived out of those interviews. Once the theoretical saturation is reached, it's better to drop the last interview that added nothing much and take no more interviews; and that is when you achieve the appropriate sample size for your study. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) suggest that saturation often occurs around 12 participants in homogenous groups. Authors conducted 22 in depth interviews; where, findings and observations were found repeated after 18 interviews. Thus last 4 interviews were dropped and 18 responses were included. The motive was to listen to their subjective answers to open ended questions and then to convert their thoughts into phenomenal statements or findings. The interviews were recorded and a journal was maintained to record memos. The interviews were very much informal and the respondents had the freedom to express or abstain from sharing the experiences. As the study talks about woman empowerment as the cause, authors realized that opinions from both the genders will matter. Thus, 13 female respondents and 5 male respondents were approached (Table 1 contains the profiles of respondents. Their names have not been disclosed).

All respondents belonged to the age-group of 25-35 and all were working professionals in service/ business sectors in urban areas of our country. This also helped ensure a homogenous kind of a group of individuals. A wide variety in their locational demographics was ensured (their states of domicile are presented in Table 1). Also, some

of the respondents were married and some were unmarried. Interviews were majorly conducted in English, but the respondents were given the freedom to use the common language Hindi, so as to enable them a chance of better expression. Interviews lasted for half an hour on average, with some going on for a bit long too. Respondents were constantly encouraged to share their experiences in addition to answering the specifically asked questions. Interviews were kept as loosely structured as possible, allowing respondents the freedom to express in their own ways and at their own paces. The data analysis initially started with manual transcriptions of the interviews. The study later adopted a software to ensure validity (Nvivo Pro) (Version 11). The next step involved identifying emergent themes based on the codes. Along with analysis in Nvivo, authors used R-language to analyse the text and form the word cloud which aided in interpreting the themes from Nvivo.

Table–1. Profile of the respondents of interview

S.No.	Age	Gender	Education Level	State of Domicile	Marital Status
1	34	Female	PGDHM	Maharashtra	Married
2	29	Female	M. Sc. (Psychology)	West Bengal	Married
3	34	Female	MBA	Uttar Pradesh	Married
4	35	Female	MBA	West Bengal	Married
5	25	Female	MBA	Gujarat	Unmarried
6	27	Female	B. Sc.	West Bengal	Unmarried
7	34	Female	PhD	Uttar Pradesh	Married
8	26	Female	M. Com.	Madhya Pradesh	Unmarried
9	24	Female	MBA	Maharashtra	Unmarried
10	27	Female	MBA	New Delhi	Unmarried
11	25	Female	MBA	Bihar	Unmarried
12	29	Female	B. Tech.	Uttaranchal	Married
13	28	Female	MBA	Orissa	Unmarried
14	32	Male	PhD	Uttar Pradesh	Married
15	24	Male	MBA	New Delhi	Unmarried
16	28	Male	MBA	Rajasthan	Unmarried
17	34	Male	MBA	Uttar Pradesh	Married
18	31	Male	MBA	Punjab	Unmarried

Research Findings

The in-depth discussions revealed many findings that are stated below:

Symbolic action for women empowerment

Good for creating awareness

Awareness seems to be the biggest outcome (and, advantage) of symbolic actions over social media. Social media is no less than the print or electronic media when we talk in terms of coverage. People of all age groups are found on some of or the other avenues of social media; some participating actively, some passively. The way these social networking sites are structured, these directly and indirectly frame connections

among people, thus creating connectivity among masses. For instance, a person might get a 'friend suggestion' notification from Facebook which is trying to connect two people who have, may be, twenty friends in common. Also, the 'tag' option of Facebook multiplies the visibility of a shared post, as all the friends of one tagged person can see the particular post shared by a person they personally don't know. Awareness can thus be the thing that social media brings in volumes. Excerpts from a 29 years old female psychologist who works in an online consulting firm:

> *"Symbolic action can work for causes which have low awareness among masses. But it is limited to awareness only."*

The impact of such awareness still remains questionable because of the fast moving nature of data and activities over social media. The statement by a 25 years old female is evidence to this fact:

> *"It has two folds to it - one is spreading awareness i.e. by doing something symbolic like this it soon becomes a fad and masses join it thus catering to a larger audience, however since things like this have become so common and more like a daily routine it is losing its importance and is easily forgettable now."*

This evidently brings out the clear purpose of "spreading awareness" about the cause and social media being highly populated (given the number of peoples' profile on Facebook, Twitter, etc.) is serving this purpose appropriately.

Family and close friends play a crucial role

> *"I changed my Facebook display picture into a black dot for supporting a protest only when my mom told about it…"*

says a 34 years old PhD student who has supported these symbolic actions very rarely. It is may be a courtesy or good terms that make people take symbolic actions. It is only when someone special to you tells you to do so, and you do so suppressing your real unwillingness towards the concerned action. An excerpt from a 25 year old female in this connection:

> *"I really don't believe in these actions over social media or Facebook, but if my action makes my best friend happy even for 24 hours (as long as the temporary WhatsApp status/ Facebook stories are on air), what's wrong in it?"*

This also yields a point that when some people chose to make symbolic action because of this reason, it is not clear that they do not believe in such symbolic actions or they are not concerned about the cause at a whole.

Personal gratification

The satisfaction in our own eyes matter most, at the end of the day. Previous research on social media profile pictures have tended to focus exclusively on issues of self presentation through the selection of portrait photographs (e.g. Hum et al., 2011). More generally, Boyd (2007) links the social networking profile to a "digital body where individuals must write themselves into being" (p. 129), emphasizing the construction of identity in everyday social interaction. An excerpt from a 24 year old female:

> *"I think that symbolic actions on social media are ways wherein socially active people choose to either enhance their social status by actively participating in expressing views against any current issue be it political or other, or for some it might feel like contributing towards a change against an ongoing process. I feel, though, it makes minute direct changes when I change my display picture or sign a petition on Facebook, but somehow I am satisfied at least to an extent that yes I stand for a change."*

Social media platforms have changed the way people used to share thoughts earlier. It has made the sharing more instant and easy. A 34 years old female on this sharing part says:

> *"When I can share that I am travelling to Dubai, or I am feeling excited, why can't I let people know I care for some cause by doing some symbolic action? At least it conveys an opinion."*

This point also conveys that symbolic action on social media is as good as any other action. Be it a travel, or support for some cause. Also, it brings out an interesting finding that when you don't have the time or scope to show your support to the concerned cause in a physical manner by going out, at least social media can help you to show your support virtually.

No action-no result activity

Symbolic actions create awareness, that's it. There is no concrete contribution towards the solution of the problem raised. This finding is being stretched here by way of observing these excerpts by some of the participants:

> *"Have never done. I feel it makes no difference, neither for me nor for the cause at large."*

One respondent says, *"Looks like a show off."*, analyzing such statements, it can be made out that even if the person feels for some cause, (s)he will not show it over the social networking sites. One of the respondents said about the very recent "become a blood donor" initiative of Facebook, that

> *"If I am really willing to donate blood, I should better get registered with a hospital. Why would I show my community on Facebook that I am acting kind? Also, what if Facebook messages me about the need of blood when I am not around? Will the virtual media help in such situations?"*

More responses that followed the theme were:

> *"I find the symbolic protest useless especially on social media. It's more of a fashion than a protest. It's doesn't make people think like ''look how many people have changed their display pics. The issue is much bigger than we thought. Things need to change''*

> *"Don't like it- I feel people just do it to join the race, they aren't doing it for the cause"*

> *"I feel people only do it for select causes to gain likes on social media."*

Majority of the participants believed that when impact is being talked about, symbolic actions over social media don't matter much. Another excerpt by a male respondent on this finding:

> *"It is a moderate impact kind of activity (a 3 out of 5 rating where 5 means very strong impact). Also, given the dynamic flow of things on social media it is easy for these things to get lost in steady flow of events, ideas, and data. This also reduces the impact. However, the social media activities don't have any accountability. Nor do they impart any degree of permanence. Hence, if 100 people change their display picture in support of a cause it is uncertain how many will actually do something tangible about it when reached out."*

Symbolic actions and its impact on women's empowerment *independence, awareness and decision making*

Collecting insights on this question made the study more interesting because of the subjective experiences participants shared.

> *"I believe women empowerment is majorly composed of two things: independence and awareness. A woman should be independent enough and should be aware of her rights and also responsibilities. By independence, I don't mean financial independence only, independence in her actions all through. Caring for other's choices is a good thing, acting under their pressure is bad."*

A male respondent says:

> *"Empowerment means enabling somebody to make choices and not be constrained. 'Women empowerment' to me is creating an environment where women have as many choices and face as many constraints as men. By creating an environment I am referring to*
>
> - *Policies*
> - *Law / rules*
> - *Punishments that deter people from preventing women from making such choices*
> - *Household practices (Example – upbringing of children, behavior towards women / girls)*
> - *Societal practices (Example – social norms towards behavior with women"*

An excerpt from a male respondent reads:

> *"Women empowerment is letting women make choices they want to make and giving them freedom to make their own choices."*

Making decisions independently is one thing, a lot still depends on how the concerned people take her decisions. A married respondent living in a joint family said,

> *"It's not about just being able to make the choices; the real empowerment is when others accept those choices and decisions gracefully. Also, she should be consulted while making choices"*

The question of whether symbolic action ensures women empowerment majorly brought a negative opinion. A female respondent puts it in a very interesting way:

> *"No, I don't think symbolic action on social media can ensure women empowerment. Awareness is High, IQ is low. EQ is lower. Receptivity is 0 to even understand the root causes."*

The term women empowerment is perceived as a relatively larger term. A male respondent says:

> *"No, I don't think it represents Women empowerment because this term is much wider for a women and these symbolic action on social media are silent ways of protesting against these heinous crimes. When we talk about women empowerment, I think of a more independent and developed life for a woman but are we heading that way at all?"*

'Supporting some cause' and 'showing support' are two different things; activities over social media signify the later one.

> *"Women empowerment is not signified by such actions; however this definitely shows that more and more people show their support towards taking steps to reduce such acts from the society."*

Women empowerment would always potentially mean some action, some changes, some transformation that the society seeks right now. An expert from

> *"No. It is a very weak form of women empowerment. Such symbolic actions are acts of empathy and not empowering women. Women empowerment can come from actions which have a tangible consequence. Symbolic activities on social media are for awareness creation and do not have tangible consequences. Also, if a person does such a thing we are still not sure whether he/she practices it. So, his action is not proof enough that he is empowering women."*

> *"Just writing something on social media doesn't change things on ground. Those people who write such things hardly do anything material for the cause. Haven't done it ever myself on social media but have been part of some initiatives on ground."* , says an engineering graduate hailing from Uttaranchal.

Removing gender differences

Women empowerment came as something holistic and not the fact that 'empowerment' relates to women only. There has been a difference in the way men and women have been portrayed, earlier in history and somehow even today. Goffman (1979) reveals the ideological prevalence of gender inequality in advertising, such that men are typically portrayed in dominant positions relative to women in a variety of consumption situations. These discourses generally depict men as 'idealized' and women as 'vulnerable' and draw from an entrenched legacy of inaccurate gendered stereotypes in the marketplace (Dobscha, 2012), which essentialize dichotomies of maleness and femaleness in society as 'natural' (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

As opposed to this portrayal, a female respondent speaks:

> *"There is no 'woman empowerment' unless there is 'man empowerment'. Empowerment is to be able to make decision, reflect and perceive things around without underlying social, gender and cultural bias."*

May be the need is to understand that the term 'empowerment' should not be associated with women anymore. Either the term should exist for both the genders, or should elope completely. An excerpt by a female respondent who teaches in a B-school in Kolkata, West Bengal says:

> *"I see empowerment for myself if I can live on my terms minus gender biasness. I hate when people ask why my husband's and my surnames are different. I feel like kicking my boss when he dictates the female staff and boozes with the male gang. I have tremendous irritation when my female students are asked not to venture out for any NSS activities… the list is long"*

Another participant who is a student of B. Sc. Complaints:

> *"Why going out at late hours is not at all an issue for men whereas for women, it's no less than a life harming threat? Threats such as theft etc. still sound logical to me. It has equal effect on both the genders; but threats like rape irritate me to bits, it sounds like one side of mankind is conspiring against another side of mankind."*

It is thus required that the common and general understanding of the term "Empowerment" should change now. It associates itself with men as well, equally, as it associates itself with women. Another excerpt that supports this finding is stated below,

> *"Women Empowerment is the ability to be able to pursue one's wishes without artificial constraints built in the society that dictates the do's and don't based on gender. Women Empowerment is not having the feeling that i can't/shouldn't do this because I belong to one particular section of the society (something that is not a choice). It is defined by a person being judged by her deeds and not by her gender."*

Mentioning the term less frequently

If symptoms are discussed again and again, the chances of occurrence of the disease increase. Same happens with the term "women empowerment". A female respondent says:

> *"Women empowerment is treating them as you treat men. Not going out of the way to make them feel special but rather make them feel equal. A girl would feel empowered if she can make any choice without the burden of gender over her head."*

Exactly as education and upbringing is almost equal for both the genders these days, empowerment as such should not be needed

for women as they should already be empowered. A male respondent adds an interesting point;

> *"By always emphasizing on we-want-women-empowerment type things, probably we are putting fuel into the problem. It's like we talk less about it, make less issues out of it, and the problem is solved automatically. May be you keep talking about 'men empowerment' repeatedly and the society starts feeling that seriously?"*

A female respondent says:

> *"Let the importance of both genders be same in movies and television; let heroes be heroes and heroines both; stop portraying the society as male-dominated one; let's not forget that life originates from a woman. It's okay if we cannot make this society a female-dominated one, at least let's make equal for both the genders."*

Apparently, film and television industry also portrays the society as a male oriented one and this conveys strong message to masses. As people will watch, same will they feel and implement. This may also has greater impacts on kids who are midway of developing their social senses, and once such inequality enters into a child's mind, it mostly remains forever. Needed is a change in thinking system and attitude of the society and slowly this "women empowerment" will not be a sensitive and sad area to ponder upon.

Conclusion

Women empowerment, especially in Indian context, has been discussed in many aspects. This study tries to connect it with the social media and symbolic actions. Findings of the study conclude that these actions are good for awareness among masses. It was also noted that may be it is creating awareness in urban and semi-urban areas; these initiatives are of no use when we talk in the context of rural India which hardly has any connect with the internet. Even basic schooling facilities are meagre and in such scenario, it is nearly impossible to make people aware of the social issues through social media. Also, some people do it because it is trendy; some people do it because it is what makes them famous among their friends-lists. Extreme opinions were also found where people have no interest in such symbolic actions. Further, it is important to note that people lying on any extreme, belonging to any gender, want women to be empowered. Women empowerment can majorly be achieved when the women are aware, informed and independent. Being able to take her own decisions without any fear make her empowered. It is also being argued that removing gender

differences can be a potential solution whereas another theme says that may be the problem is not that huge as it is being portrayed. All in all, things can become easy if women are well informed of their duties, rights, responsibilities, and of the things going on in their surroundings. Men too, should be taught and empowered. Ensuring these two facets, India will be a yet better place to live. This paper provides insights to people/companies designing campaigns on social media. How much a campaign will be successful will largely depend on how many people follow it. It is thus important to understand the psychology of people (mainly, youth, because they form the major component of India's present population) so as to know how much will they be involved in any symbolic action that the campaign asks for. Also, it presents themes for defining women empowerment which can contribute to the relevant pool of literature. This paper essentially draws insights from the younger generation of our population. Findings might differ if people of different age groups are interviewed. In this direction, this paper also leaves a room for further research.

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