

Actress, Activism and Social Media Engagement: A Content Analysis of the Official Facebook Page of Parvathy Thiruvothu

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Abstract

The formation of the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) in Kerala is considered a defining moment in the Malayalam film industry. The incident of the abduction and sexual assault of an established actress from the industry, which became the catalyst for the formation of WCC, received much attention and scrutiny from the media and the public. This study investigates how the online public has received all these developments challenging patriarchal norms by analysing their Facebook behaviours. And for this, the engagements on posts on the official Facebook page of Parvathy Thiruvothu, one of the founding members of WCC and who was subjected to much public ire before and after the formation of WCC, were analysed through a gendered lens. The results showed a shift in the actress's perception before and after the formation of WCC. While men were mostly seen responding to her pre-WCC formation posts adulating her beauty and talent, her feministic stands in the later years up until the formation of WCC were met critically, giving her the title of "feminichi." Nevertheless, in the post-WCC formation, more women and men supported her cause and engaged in constructive discussions on gender rights and equality via Facebook.

Keywords

WCC, Qualitative Content Analysis, Facebook Behaviour, Gender Equality, Social Media Engagement

Introduction

The Malayalam film industry is in a transitional phase. The films are becoming more and more socio-political commentary of the current times; they are more gender-sensitive in their content; more women-centric films are being made; but even more remarkably, women actors are demanding equal rights. Though the winds of change

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have been blowing slowly, all its good intentions were put to the test when a female actor was abducted and sexually assaulted in a moving vehicle on February 17, 2017.

The industry became highly divisive when the accused turned out to be a prominent male actor from the same industry. Different organizations within the industry, notably AMMA (Association of Malayalam Movie Artists), wavered in their stance toward the victim. Displeased by these developments, a few women artists, directors, writers, and industry technicians formed another organization named the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) in solidarity with the victim and as a voice for the women in the Malayalam film industry.

Although all of these developments were subjected to heavy public and media scrutiny, the members of the WCC came at the receiving end of the issue, especially on Facebook. They were attacked in cyberspace, more specifically on their official Facebook pages. One of the prominent actresses who were more vocal and were at the forefront of the movement was Parvathy Thiruvothu. She was made an easy target for much misogyny on Facebook mainly because of her image as a feminist and her opinions on misogyny in Malayalam films. Moreover, this paper intends to analyse the gendered perception qualitatively on the transformation of this actress by analysing the Facebook behaviour of the online public who engage with the actress's official Facebook page.

To meet this objective, the methodology adopted was that of qualitative content analysis. The variable identified for the study was gender. The data about the Facebook behaviour measures, like comments, shares, and reactions to the actor's Facebook posts before and after the formation of WCC, was analysed. The comments section below such posts were subjected to content analysis.

Actress Abduction Case Timeline

The following is a timeline showcasing the major events in the actress abduction and sexual assault case:

Feb 17, 2017: The actress was abducted and sexually assaulted in a moving car. After two hours, she was dropped at the house of Mr. Lal, a noted actor, and director in the Malayalam film industry. The actress approached the police, and an FIR was filed on the same day

Feb 19, 2017: Police arrested three of the seven accused

Feb 23, 2017: Pulser Suni, the prime accused, surrendered before the Additional Chief Magistrate

May 18, 2017: Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) was formed

July 10, 2017: Malayalam film actor Dileep was arrested in connection with the case

Sep 10, 2017: Members of WCC launched a campaign, 'Avalkoppam,' in solidarity with the actress

Dec 5, 2017: The charge sheet submitted, including more than 50 people from the film industry as witnesses, was accepted

Jan 30, 2020: The trial began after three years

Sep 18, 2020: WCC reinstated their solidarity with the actress after several witnesses, including the popular actors Bhama, Siddique, Bindu Panikker, and Edavela Babu, turned hostile

Facebook Behaviour

Based on the level of cognitive effort required, Facebook behaviours can be ordered as follows: like, comment, and share (Kim & Yang, 2017). That means the least effort goes into liking a post, and sharing a post requires the most level of cognition. This phenomenon is because, compared to writing comments, shared posts make it to the News Feed and enter the user's profile page. Therefore, users will be more careful while sharing a post than liking or commenting.

Objectives

This paper attempts to understand the online public's gendered perception of the transformation of Parvathy Thiruvothu as a representation of the few women who went from being artists to forming an organization and pitting against age-old inequality.

Specific Objectives:

- To examine the Facebook behaviours such as likes, comments, shares, and reactions received on Facebook posts on the official page of Parvathy Thiruvothu from the pre-WCC formation and post-WCC formation phases.
- To analyse the content of the Facebook post comments from the pre-WCC formation and post-WCC formation for themes.
- To understand the gender dynamics in the shift in discourse around gender equality.

Method

A qualitative content analysis of 14 Facebook posts was carried out to meet the study's objectives. Purposive sampling was used since only those Facebook posts were required, which were key to the objectives under study. The variable under consideration was gender. The selected 14 Facebook posts were divided into two sections of 7 posts each, with the formation of WCC as the reference point for the division. The Women in Cinema Collective was registered as a society on 1st November 2017. Therefore, the posts before and after this date were divided into two phases: Pre-WCC formation and Post-WCC formation. Pre-WCC formation phase contains seven posts from the years 2015 and 2016 combined. And Post-WCC formation phase contains seven posts from 2017 through 2020. Each date was coded as Post 1 to Post 14.

The same number of posts was selected from each phase to tackle the disparity of having more years coming under the second phase. Also, the study has carefully selected similar posts from both phases to understand the change in the social media engagement between the actor and the online public and among the people who engaged with the actor's Facebook page. It should also be noted that even though the actor was actively taking part in the social cause before the formation of WCC, the second phase saw a surge in the causes she stood for; in other words, the activist role was on par with her role as an actor. During 2015-2016, more posts were related to films, film promotions, and sharing photos with the public. Therefore, the second phase has more Facebook posts that deal with activism than those related to just films.

Analysis

To meet the objectives, the engagement of the online public on the official Facebook page of Parvathy Thiruvothu was analysed. This was done by examining how the online public used the options available on the Facebook platform- like, comment, and share (Kim & Yang, 2017). Along with the like option, the six reactions that come with it, namely, *love*, *haha*, *wow*, *sad*, *care*, and *angry*, were evaluated. This has helped to understand the response of users to the post better because not every post can be liked (Stinson, 2016). Along with this, the content of comments section was analysed for themes that could be grouped into positive and negative based on the words used.

Pre-WCC Formation Phase:

The following tables, Table 1 and Table 2, describes the coding of the Facebook posts, including the nature and context of the post; and the data about the like and reactions received to each post, respectively. Table 3 depicts the number of comments and shares received by each post.

Table 1

Code, Nature, and Context of the Facebook Post

Sl. no	Code	Date	Nature of the Post	Context
1	Post 1	24 th March 2015	Personal	Shared a photo of a caricature of the character 'RJ Sarah' the actor played in the movie <i>Bangalore Days</i> , released on 30 th May 2014
2	Post 2	9 th June 2015	Personal	Shared photo of the actor
3	Post 3	19 th September 2015	Film Release	Post on the movie <i>Ennu Ninte Moideen</i> on its release, congratulating the entire team and wishing the audience a good time at the movies
4	Post 4	7 th December 2015	Relief Work	Post with pictures taken amid the relief activities for the 2015 South India Floods as a volunteer of the <i>Anbodu Kochi</i> ('with love Kochi') group that came together to send relief materials to the affected areas.
5	Post 5	24 th December 2015	Personal	Post clearing the air on her name not having a caste name 'Menon' as a surname in official records
6	Post 6	24 th December 2015	Film Release	Shared photos and experiences while filming the 2015 Malayalam movie <i>Charlie</i> on the day of its release
7	Post 7	28 th December 2016	Personal	Shared a half-face photo of the actor wearing her signature frames and hair in a top knot

Table 2**Likes and Reactions for Each Post**

	POST 1	POST 2	POST 3	POST 4	POST 5	POST 6	POST 7
Like	9.6k	7k	16k	5k	12k	15k	36k
Love	72	130	43	15	98	167	1.6k
Angry	46	59	8	3	2	3	398
Haha	11	5	-	-	15	3	99
Wow	4	5	-	1	6	21	202
Care	2	2	-	-	-	-	3
Sad	1	-	1	-	-	-	16

Table 3**Number of Comments and Shares**

	POST 1	POST 2	POST 3	POST 4	POST 5	POST 6	POST 7
Comments	122	182	697	158	1000	882	787
Shares	16	18	380	475	302	86	68

The following section contains the analysis of the data presented in Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3. The analysis was conducted by recording the significant observations in each aspect of Facebook behaviour.

Like: It is evident from Table 1 that there is a rise in the number of likes received for the posts with each passing year during the Pre-WCC formation phase. Post 7 stands out in this phase, with 36k likes as the most liked post. Posts 5, 6, and 3 have also crossed 10k likes. Men formulate a significant share of the users who liked the posts. Women also showed their presence more by liking the post than by commenting and sharing.

Reactions: The most striking observation of the reactions section was the angry reaction from men. The love reaction was the highest among reactions for all the posts. All the reactions were sharply high for Post 7 compared to the rest of the posts.

Comment: Post 5 received the highest number of comments, with men making the most rounds. Women's comments were higher for Post 5 than for the other posts. The comments in these posts carried very positive content appreciating her stand to clear the speculations regarding her surname. Nevertheless, it was Post 7 which carried the most negative content with derogatory words to belittle and humiliate the actor in the wake of the 'Kasaba row.' Men almost entirely wrote such posts.

Share: Post 4, regarding the relief activities carried out by the actor during the Chennai floods of 2015, was the most shared.

Post-WCC Formation Phase

The following tables, Table 4 and Table 5, describes the coding of the Facebook posts, including the nature and context of the post; and the data about the like and reactions received to each post, respectively. Table 6 depicts the number of comments and shares received by each post.

Table 4
Code, Nature, and Context of the Facebook Post

Sl. no	Code	Date	Nature of the Post	Context
1	Post 8	13 th December 2017	Activism	The post was about a special screening of the 2016 Malayalam movie <i>Kasaba</i> following the controversy over a comment the actor made about misogyny in films taking the example of the said film, which starred Mammootty. The post was addressed to the online media that allegedly has created the controversy and the fans who believed such scoops
2	Post 9	24 th December 2017	Personal	Shared an online article by screenwriter duo Bobby-Sanjay published in The News Minute explaining why some men dislike Parvathy written against the backdrop of the <i>Kasaba</i> row
3	Post 10	9 th March 2018	Advertisement	Levi's jeans brand's 'I shape my world' series advertisement featured the actor as a voice for change where she briefly narrates her journey as a feminist
4	Post 11	12 th August 2018	Relief Work	Posted a video from Kochi urging people to donate relief materials to help the affected by the 2018 Kerala floods
5	Post 12	28 th April 2019	Film Release	Post sharing the photo of the character 'Pallavi' that the actor played in the 2019 Malayalam movie <i>Uyare</i> two days after its release
6	Post 13	19 th September 2020	Activism	Post lamenting the situation of witnesses turning hostile in the actress abduction case of 2017 and explaining how badly it is affecting the victim
7	Post 14	12 th October 2020	Activism	Post explaining her decision to resign from the Association of Malayalam Movie Artists (AMMA) after the general secretary made a comparison between the victim and a demised person

Table 5**Likes and Reactions for Each Post**

	Post 8	Post 9	Post 10	Post 11	Post 12	Post 13	Post 14
Likes	3.6k	9.3k	5.7k	10k	12k	7.8k	91k
Love	370	779	853	862	2.8k	909	16k
Angry	1.2k	2.8k	1.3k	21	5	15	30
Haha	62	1.1k	44	27	46	150	1.4k
Wow	9	52	109	34	34	4	131
Care	-	-	-	1	-	46	611
Sad	6	31	9	33	164	14	31

Table 6**Number of Comments and Shares**

	POST 8	POST 9	POST 10	POST 11	POST 12	POST 13	POST 14
Comments	7.1k	1k	1k	604	788	1.1k	21k
Shares	253	150	145	4.4k	1k	225	9.1k

The following section contains the analysis of the data presented in Table 4, Table 5, and Table 6. The analysis was conducted by recording the significant observations in each aspect of Facebook behaviour.

Like: Post 14, with 91k thumps ups, carried the most likes for the post about the news and explanation behind the actor's resignation from AMMA. This phase carried the most likes combined compared to the Pre-WCC formation phase. Women were as visible as men in the likes section.

Reactions: Post 14 garnered the most reactions from the users, except for the angry reaction. In this phase, there was a surge in the use of angry reactions and haha reactions apart from the love. Like the earlier phase, the angry reaction was almost entirely from men.

Comment: There is a significant rise in the number of comments showing the increased engagement of the users with the content on the page. The comments were highest for Post 14. The content of the comments in this phase carried a mix of positive and negative words – derogatory and words of appreciation and admiration. Another feature of this phase was the comments by many women and men defending the actor through fitting replies.

Share: The number of shares was also significantly high, with Post 14 with the most shares, followed by Post 11, which was regarding the Kerala flood relief activities, and Post 12, which dealt with the film's release.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to understand the gendered perception of the transformation of an actor into an activist by analysing the Facebook behaviour of the online public. For this, the official Facebook page of Parvathy Thiruvothu was used to study user engagement with the content of the posts and to conduct a qualitative content analysis of the comment section below the selected Facebook posts. The study also attempted to understand the changing discourse among the users while engaging with content that challenges the status quo.

While comparing the selected posts in the Pre-WCC formation phase and Post-WCC formation phase, it was clear that the latter had more posts labeled as activism, which showed the actor's transformation. The actor's association with feminism was visible from the Pre-WCC phase. However, later her involvement with gender injustice causes and activism considered two pathways to reaching a feminist identity (Frederick & Stewart, 2018), truly made her stand out.

From Table 2 & Table 5, it was evident that the popularity of the actress has increased with each passing year as the number of likes has increased correspondingly. Because clicking like is considered as the lowest form of effort, the tables show that the actor's cause was supported by the online community. The comment section was ruled by men making derogatory references to belittle the achievements of Parvathy Thiruvothu both as an actor and an activist. Constant attempts were visible to dismiss activism by women as not "real" activism or being slacktivism (Craddock & Craddock, 2018).

Nevertheless, in the Post-WCC posts, more men were visible defending the actor against other men who often behaved in a mob-like fashion. Towards Post 14, women were seen engaging more in the comments section, which suggested that they were identifying themselves with the cause and engaging in Facebook behaviour, which required more cognitive effort than just liking a post. Though the comments were filled with whataboutery and misogynist references for a period, they were later found to be in the majority with the content of appreciation and admiration. The comments were seen to discuss gender equality more openly than in the previous posts.

The fact that people started sharing posts of the actor, which requires a high level of cognitive effort, showed the excellent reception of the change and discourse that happened as part of the actress abduction case and the formation of WCC.

Collective cause or action helps one be a part of a broader community outside their identity (Vindhya, 2012). The formation of WCC did just that to the members, starting discourses on not much touched upon issues of gender equality and justice in workplaces. Parvathy Thiruvothu sharing such content on her official Facebook page has helped to engage the online public. Furthermore, the study, with the help of Facebook behaviours, suggests that the online community indeed has perceived the social change of women coming to the fore and demanding their rights well.

Conclusion

Societal norms dictate what to do and what not to do. There are some invisible boundaries that one should not dare cross. Films are nothing but a reflection of the society they belong to. So, a patriarchal society will have a predominantly patriarchal film industry. Moreover, everybody in it will have demarcated positions, and anyone who challenges it will be dealt a heavy hand.

The formation of WCC can be seen as challenging the status quo, as a tipping point for all the inequalities that existed up until then. The film industry is only the extension of the patriarchy that runs deep in society. So if the film industry is reluctant to share power with women, it is only natural that the larger society will also sense the same dilemma. That being said, responding with a ‘why not in the face of resistance to change can also steer society in a new, more inclusive direction. Parvathy Thiruvothu did, through her posts, poke this question to the online public.

The study shows that people have used all forms of Facebook behaviours – like, react, comment, and share- to engage with the content in the posts on the page of Parvathy Thiruvothu and to gain a better perspective on topics of gender equality and justice.

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