

Rural Young Men, Facebook, and Same-Sex Relationships in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

In the context of South Asian postcolonial socio-cultural history, the suppression of same-sex desires remains a prevailing challenge. Amid this backdrop, Facebook has emerged as the dominant social media platform in Sri Lankan society, offering a space for individuals to express and establish their same-sex intimacies safely and openly. This thesis explores the motivations and mechanisms behind how rural Sri Lankan young men aged 18-24 employ Facebook to nurture their same-sex relationships. The foundation of this thesis is grounded in an ontological understanding of how European colonial Victorian sodomy and debauchery laws imposed criminalization on South Asia's non-heterosexual values. Epistemologically, the study explores how contemporary postcolonial Sri Lankan youth are reshaping LGBTIQ+ rights through their engagement with Facebook and the broader internet and social networking platforms. Methodologically, the research adopts a constructive ontology and an interpretivist epistemology, using an inductive qualitative design. The data collection unfolds in three successive phases: a qualitative survey (involving 50 participants), qualitative interviews (with 30 participants), and a Facebook ethnographic study conducted between September 2019 and February 2020. Thematic analysis of this research reveals several key insights. Firstly, young men often covertly express their homosexual desires using fake or alternative Facebook profiles, mirroring the discretion required in their offline lives due to the cultural stigmatization of heteronormativity and homophobia. Simultaneously, they advocate for same-sexual rights from legal authorities, government bodies, and society. Secondly, Facebook is a platform for establishing dialogue and mutual understanding before initiating same-sex relationships. Thirdly, while some individuals maintain hidden profiles to connect with others, young male LGBTIQ+ activists and like-minded individuals openly disclose their intimate connections on their real profiles. As a result, this has led to a public dialogue surrounding same-sex needs, fostering the development of fandoms, sexual

clubs, and counter-publics while simultaneously advocating for offline activism. Fourthly, the study highlights how the internet and other social networking sites, alongside Facebook, provide access to Western LGBTIQ+ knowledge, which individuals use to assert their contemporary sexual rights. In conclusion, this research underscores the intersectional nature of both virtual and non-virtual spaces, demonstrating how individuals navigate diverse paths of dialogue, desire, presentation, performance, recreation, and activism to realize their needs and rights. Theoretically, the thesis uncovers the blurring of Goffmanian front and back regions in presenting intimate desires, even on fake profiles. Consequently, it suggests the need for LGBTIQ+ education and queer studies in Sri Lanka to address the escalating sexual health and psychosocial issues faced by its people.

Keywords: Same-sexual relationships, Rural Sri Lankan Young Men, Facebook, Social Networking Sites, Virtual and Non-virtual spaces, Heteronormativity, Homophobia.