

## 7 LGBTQIA+ Community and Social Media: Evidence from Sri Lanka

### Introduction

Mass media, folk media and new media are the main media platforms available globally. Information and communication technologies have emerged and are used by people to engage on various new media platforms. Social media is at the forefront of digital technology and is a part of modern life. It has grown tremendously in a few years, bringing together millions of people. As a digital tool with a wide range of applications – channels, handles, blogs and websites – it allows people to easily create content, communicate information and ideas in real time and build relationships in the virtual world. Social media platforms are used by everyone that includes sexual or gender minorities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, intersexual, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) are also part of the users of social media platforms.

Queer is an umbrella term that can mean any diverse sexuality or gender. LGBTQIA+ is a dynamic acronym used to represent gender-based minorities. This acronym is constantly evolving because when it comes to gender and sexual identities, the possibilities, as we know now, are endless. There are many other terms that people use to describe their experiences of their gender, sexuality, and physiological sex characteristics. The LGBTQIA+ community faces a plethora of challenges in society due to their sexual orientation. Sri Lanka is a patriarchal country with strong cultural influences from its colonial past. The majority of the community does not accept homosexuality. According to the Equal Ground Survey (2021), approximately 12 per cent of Sri Lankans are homosexual. The LGBTQIA+

community, more specifically the Queer population, is affected by social disapproval and legal restrictions in the country. The thoughts and ideas of Sri Lankans are heavily influenced by patriarchal and religious ideology. Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Muslims are the major religions practised in Sri Lanka, an island country in South Asia. These religions oppose the queer community and homosexuality. The idea of gender is culturally formulated and structured. This reality at the grassroots level is traditionally regulated and laws are not effectively enforced, which makes them inadequate to face these new threats. Examining the representation of gender minorities on social media is vital in addressing this situation. This chapter contributes to designing and implementing effective measures to minimize and eradicate violence on social media, especially within the Sri Lankan landscape.

## The Background, the Data and the Perspectives

Over the past years, the technological revolution has changed the dynamics of the world. Social media is a vivacious part of this technological revolution. It reflects the world views and is an influential medium to change society. It is widely observed that social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), Viber, and Snapchat are widely used by Sri Lankans, and it was found that the use of social media is rapidly rising in recent years. These platforms have become an interesting outlet for the freedom of expression among Sri Lankans, especially gender minorities, to divulge their activities, share information, collaborate with people with similar thought processes, and associate with other societies. On the other hand, gender minorities such as LGBTQIA+ community suffer from stereotypical images enforced on them and face multiple forms of oppression and harassment.

According to Kemp (2021), 4.20 billion social media users are there around the world with an average daily usage of 2 hours and 25 minutes. Youth use social media more than others in general, and there is tremendous

popularity of social media among them. Notably, young females dominate social media more than young males. Globally, Facebook remains the dominant social networking platform and the preferred choice for adults (Gencer & Koc, 2012; Webb & Temple, 2016). Social media has reinforced, disrupted, or simply shifted systems of gender relations and gender norms (Miller et al., 2016). The presentation of gender is endemic to all forms of social media, including blogs, Facebook and online games. Social media has generated room for men and women to change the conception of gender roles and to challenge the constant prevalence of gender stereotypes in the patriarchal society (Webb & Temple, 2016).

These transformations are, however, overshadowed by widespread gender-based violence perpetrated against social media users. An emerging body of literature in sociology indicates that digital platforms are increasingly significant in how we engage with our sexual and gendered lives (Adams-Santos, 2020; Das & Farber, 2020). Sexual or gender minority social media users face the 'unique challenge of managing disclosure of their sexual or gender identity on social media', where different members of their social networks (e.g. friends, family and peers) may see their posts and their digital presence (McConnell et al., 2017).

In Sri Lanka, there are no laws or guidelines that regulate online content such as text, images, animations, music, videos and emerging formats. The existing laws are sometimes interpreted as a weaker tool, so the government have limited control over enforcing national laws to regulate cyberspace. However, Gunawardene (2017) argues that 'authoritarian states have devised ways to filter, monitor, and block web-based content. Even some democratic states have considered or already implemented various restrictions in response to the potential legal, economic and security challenges raised by new media'. On the other hand, the Code of Professional Practice of The Editors' Guild of Sri Lanka (2016), adopted by the Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka, indicates that it is binding on newspaper publishing organizations, editors and their journalists and contributors (in both print and digital formats). It aims to ensure that the Sri Lankan press is free, responsible, and sensitive to the needs and expectations of its readers while maintaining the highest standards of journalism.

## Social Media and LGBTQIA+ Presences in Sri Lanka

To develop this chapter, the author reached out to many sexual and gender minorities. It was found that Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp are commonly used by the LGBTQIA+ community of Sri Lanka. Facebook is one of the most ubiquitous social networks; the site has become more than just a way to stay in touch with friends and share content. The LGBTQIA+ community also engages on Facebook at high level. Everyone, from small businesses to multi-billion-dollar conglomerates has a presence on Facebook. Connections between people can be created through Facebook in numerous ways. Nevertheless, Facebook is also the most misused social media platform globally. Unfortunately, some LGBTQIA+ stakeholders avoid their presence on Facebook due to the hate speech and cyberbullying they face, which leads them to leave cyberspace.

X is a social networking and microblogging service with millions of members worldwide. Many people, mostly educated individuals, including celebrities, are active on it. The big advantage X offers over Facebook is that it allows users to engage with a larger audience without compromising privacy. X users tend to be engaged and responsive, and the site is a great place to keep tabs on breaking news. In recent years, X has been used for activism, democracy, and justice worldwide. In Sri Lanka, the LGBTQIA+ community, activists, and organizations actively use X for social change and support. However, cyberbullying happens on X as well. Compared with other social media platforms, X is a relatively safer one.

Instagram is a result of the iPhone revolution and does not involve much conversation. Instagram smartly utilizes the hashtag system of categorization. Instagram is about posting pictures and presenting oneself and one's life in the form of a digital photo album to others. Due to social media, a new type of celebrity has emerged: influencers and micro-celebrities. Influencers and micro-celebrities on Instagram can be defined as famous Instagram users, often called 'Instagrammers'. They are admired by their fans or followers for their content and their personality, which includes outfits, lifestyle, fashion, makeup skills, and so on. For many LGBTQIA+

users, Instagram is not just about connecting with friends but also it is to see and be seen. It is about affecting their self-esteem, getting attention, admiration from strangers, and lots of likes and followers. Unlike other parts of the world, hashtag movements, proactive LGBTQIA+ participation, and activism are comparatively less prevalent in Sri Lanka.

YouTube is one of the most visited media platforms in the world. In Sri Lanka, it is exceedingly accessible, and the LGBTQIA+ community and organizations use YouTube for various purposes that include showcasing their endeavours. Videos are uploaded on YouTube related to queer festivals, pride celebrations, get-togethers, awareness programmes, cultural events, and news content by and about queer people and queer events. However, many LGBTQIA+-based YouTube videos attract nasty sexist comments, felty expressions with and without emojis, hate speech, threats, cyberbullying, and other forms of online abuse, which shatter the progress of sexual and gender minorities.

Instant messengers like WhatsApp are smartphone applications and one of the newly added social media platforms because of their status, group, community, and channel features. The application is highly addictive and has a significant impact on regular users. WhatsApp is widely used by the Sri Lankan LGBTQIA+ community, either as individual users or through business accounts (for NGOs and other supportive organizations) for personal and professional communication. WhatsApp has created a revolution by allowing like-minded people, more specifically transgender individuals, to create and be part of various WhatsApp groups. These groups enable them to communicate about job and career opportunities, learning-related notices, community-related messages, and more. These WhatsApp groups are highly proactive, supporting each other and standing united during crises and troubles.

From the above, it is clear that Sri Lanka's LGBTQIA+ community is more active in the digital era. Digitalization is opening a new sphere for the discourses of queer people. Due to the advancement, many members of the community are coming out with hope. Unfortunately, online abuse, a lack of sex education, patriarchal ideology, religious and cultural influences, and colonial laws affect them and they are underrepresented not only in the offline spaces but also in the online spaces. LGBTQIA+ people and

activists are fighting for an inclusive representation of the queer community in the country in all spaces, both online and offline.

## Laws and Ethical Dilemmas in Sri Lanka

Activists and academics highlighted the legal challenges in Sri Lanka. Most of the South Asian countries were under British colonial rule that criminalized homosexuality and other gender plurality in their colonies. After independence, only a few countries reviewed these discriminatory laws. Sri Lanka still enforces colonial laws. According to the Human Dignity Trust (n.d.), Sri Lanka still criminalizes homosexuality under sections 365 and 365A of the Penal Code. Section 399 of the Penal Code 'cheating by personation' affects transgender community. Due to this, the queer community is often victimized and harassed in both online and offline spaces. According to Circular No.0-34/2016 issued in December 2016 by the Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medical Services, gender recognition certificates may only be issued by the ministry, upon completion of a legal medical process by transgender persons.

Ethics provides a chance and is a tool for making difficult moral choices, in both our personal and professional lives. Ethics is more important than morals. The best examination and understanding of an ethical situation can only be achieved through the perspective of the communication process. Media ethics should promote the understanding that moral choices are an essential part of human existence and that the consequences of ethical decisions can cause either suffering or happiness. Most of the LGBTQIA+ activists mentioned that according to the Code of Professional Practice (Code of Ethics) of 'The Editors' Guild of Sri Lanka (2016), adopted by the Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan press is free, responsible, and sensitive to the needs and expectations of its readers while maintaining the highest standards of journalism. Those standards

require newspapers to aim for accuracy and professional integrity and to uphold the best traditions of investigative journalism in the public interest, unfettered by distorting commercialism or by improper pressure or narrow self-interest, which conspires against press freedom.

Although newspapers and working journalists are free to express their opinions, they should also consider the opinions of others and try to hold a sense of social responsibility. This code protects both individual rights and the public's right to know the information. It must be respected not only in letter (texts) but also in spirit – not interpreted so narrowly as to compromise its duty to respect individual rights or so broadly as to prevent publication in the public interest. Editors should immediately cooperate with the Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka (PCCSL) to resolve complaints. Any publication found to have breached the Code of Ethics must prominently publish the judgement in full, including a headline reference to the PCCSL.

The Code of Professional Practice mainly focuses on accurate reporting, corrections and apologies, opportunities to reply, confidentiality of sources, general reporting and writing, privacy, harassment, subterfuge, and integrity. The provisions of this code also apply to the online publications of the print media, where the editor of the newspaper, magazine, or freestanding web publication is ultimately responsible for it and could reasonably have been expected both to exercise editorial control over it and apply the terms of the code before publication. The material used should not have been pre-edited to conform to the online or offline standards of another media regulatory body.

The Editors' Guild of Sri Lanka shall review the provisions of this code from time to time, in consultation with a Code Committee composed of members and non-members appointed by the Guild. The code is supported by organizations such as The Newspaper Society of Sri Lanka, Free Media Movement, Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association, Sri Lanka Press Institute, Sri Lanka College of Journalism, Sri Lanka Tamil Media Alliance, Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum, Federation of Media Employees Trade Union, and the South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) – Sri Lanka Chapter.

## LGBTQIA+ Activism and Organizations

The Equal Ground, Venasa Transgender Network, the Community Welfare and Development Fund Sri Lanka (CWDF Lanka), Chathra, CPBR, Equite, Anichcham, Eastern Queer Collective, Equal Ground, Voice of Queer, Sanyog, Jaffna Sangam, Jaffna Transgender Network (JTN), National Transgender Network (NTN Sri Lanka), and more organizations are working on empowering and uplifting the LGBTQIA+ community. Equal Ground is an organization which has been working for fifteen years in Sri Lanka to ensure equitable human and political rights for LGBTQIA+ members of society. Venasa Transgender Network is a non-profit organization based in Colombo, Sri Lanka, that advocates for and works towards for the rights and betterment of the transgender community in Sri Lanka. CWDF Lanka is a community-focused fund that provides support for needs such as shelter, food, legal aid, and health needs for LGBTQIA+ individuals. Jaffna Transgender Network is a volunteer-run network in Jaffna working to build community livelihoods for transgender, queer and gender non-conforming individuals. Jaffna Sangam is an organization serving the Tamil-speaking LGBTQIA+ community. National Transgender Network Sri Lanka is a non-profit organization that works towards the betterment of the transgender community.

Most of the above-mentioned organizations utilize Facebook and X to proclaim their activities and thoughts and to achieve their vision and goals. LGBTQIA+ people and activists also use social media and digital technologies as a sphere for their activism and empowerment. These people actively engage on various social media platforms for positive changes. On the other hand, an LGBTQIA+ activist mentioned that their community faces incomparable cyberbullying more in regional lingo. This makes the community and the individual feel uncomfortable being in cyberspace; thus, it leads to not revealing their identity on digital public forums, which suppresses their social identity, as held in the offline space of society. So, the LGBTQIA+ community has no representation, less representation, or misrepresentation on various social media platforms, especially Instagram, Facebook, X, and YouTube. They face homophobic and transphobic attacks,

various forms of cyberbullying and stereotyping in social media, and type-casting in mass media, especially in feature films.

## Sri Lankan Social Media Space: Issues and Concerns

### *Homophobia and Transphobia*

Homophobia and transphobia can be defined as the mentality of hatred and dislike toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other genders that are non-normative to the gender identity in society. It is mainly caused by a lack of understanding of sexualities and gender among people. An academic from Kandy said that ‘most of the people in Sri Lanka do not have even basic knowledge about homosexuality. There is no proper sex education system in the country. Sri Lankan history and many religions practised in Sri Lanka also misguide the public and religious communities. They believe homosexuality and bisexuality are against their religion and culture. Due to that, people grow up without accurate information and knowledge about different sexualities and genders in the world’. This creates hate and intolerance towards the LGBTQIA+ community. Intolerance of alternative sexualities is the main reason for the online and offline underrepresentation of LGBTQIA+ communities in Sri Lanka. Homophobic attacks, including the usage of derogatory and filthy words, are common in Sri Lanka and are visible on almost all the social media platforms that exist at the present time.

An LGBTQIA+ activist said that political homophobia is a weapon used against homosexual people to hide real issues on social media platforms in the digital era and society still marginalizes the queer community. An academic from Colombo mentioned that homophobia has affected politicians in Sri Lankan history. During a parliament debate in 2017, Member of Parliament Mangala Samaraweera was called *Ponmaya* [impotent or effeminate], which is a pejorative term, by another Member of Parliament, Wimal Weerawansa. Ranil Wickremesinghe, who was Prime Minister in 2018, also faced a homophobic attack by the President of Sri Lanka,

Maithiripala Sirisena. These incidents spread like wildfire on social media, getting both positive and negative reactions. The LGBTQIA+ community, more specifically transgender people are not accepted by many in Sri Lanka. Even though transgender people have grown and achieved significantly, the digital platform looks at them as an anomaly in society. Social media gives ways to target and harass transgender people. Negative representation and comments affect the mental health of the transgender community and transgender activists. Online transphobia is a major issue in Sri Lanka; it is reflected through toxic language, hatred, and other abuses. Most members of the transgender community have experienced homophobia and transphobia on various social media platforms with a high level of intensity. From the field-level data, it can be understood that Facebook is the main platform that disseminates homophobia and transphobia on a great scale.

### *Cyberbullying*

Cyberbullying is a form of violence where people are bullied and harassed on new media platforms based on their gender, sex, religion, ethnicity, or any other social identity. Cyberbullying manifests in society as homophobia and transphobia as well. Cyberstalking also happens on social media, harms the queer community, and threatens them in Sri Lanka. Many LGBTQIA+ people hide their identity online and offline from the people around them such as family members, friends, peers, and relatives. Social media's unglamorous side and cyberbullying affect LGBTQIA+ people and their socialization. A trans woman from Colombo said that 'it's tricky to express our gender identity on social media. Because people are bullied based on their sexual orientation and identity, whether it is normative or non-normative at the world's perspective'. Another trans woman from Jaffna said that 'In the early stages, the media used and manipulated the word "transgender" in an inappropriate way'. But now some media are coming forward to allow the expression of transgender people's talents and becoming a platform to seek support against violence or oppression which they face. It is found that many social media users on digital platforms support and talk about

the transgender community and the challenges they face, to get online social appreciation and to get likes, shares, and positive comments that may increase their popularity. But they do not do any good offline, that includes the upliftment of the marginalized LGBTQIA+ community. Further, another trans man said that ‘they exposed me in social media as “transgender” without my permission. Social media is not accepting us like others. Uploading a picture may result in derogatory comments which mocks my identity itself. That is why I feel worried about using social media.’ On a deeper level, discriminatory and abusive comments and widespread ignorance against the LGBTQIA+ community were observed on Facebook and YouTube at large. Hate speech and under-representation were observed on X.

### *Doxxing*

Doxxing is a form of online violence that involves revealing or publishing private or personal information about a person online without their permission. Mostly, attackers are using some common techniques to collect information, such as public Wi-Fi, analysing metadata, and internet protocol logging. According to various studies, many people are not aware of digital security and they are using public Wi-Fi. In Sri Lanka, there are a few incidents where doxxing is used for harassing, threatening, and seeking revenge on the LGBTQIA+ community. Doxxing is a popular tool in the culture wars, with activists in Sri Lanka doxxing those with opposing viewpoints. Many queer and non-queer activists have been doxxed and they are suffering from social media mobs and even death threats. Social media doxxing involves the collection of personal information about queer people from social media accounts. They collect the location, place of work, friends, photos, likes and dislikes, places that have been visited, the names of family members and pets and more. They use those details to create fake profiles and share unwanted information about a particular person. Further, many members of the LGBTQIA+ community do not like to express their personal information, but through doxxing, confidential information about them is revealed.

### *Hate Speech*

Most queer activists said that they avoid social media because of hate speech under their posts. They also receive many negative and toxic comments through social media messenger applications. A queer activist from Colombo said that ‘the queer issue is difficult and involves the discussion of religion. I face many forms of hatred on social media. Someone blamed me and said ‘You are a curse to this society’. The expression troubled me and questioned my existence itself’. In another incident, a trans woman from Jaffna said that ‘most people love to use social media, like them, If I share a thought, users or friends view/share the posts and I receive feedback. However, the view of society towards transgender people is not that good, so some write comments which discourage me. On the other hand, few support me in a sympathizing manner. Therefore, a debate starts in digital public space to know whether society is accepting us or not. This uncomfortable situation puts me off’. It was found that most LGBTQIA+ people and activists face hate speech on Facebook compared to other social media platforms.

### *Psychological Abuse*

The LGBTQIA+ community also experiences various psychological abuses on social media. It creates trauma and emotional imbalances that affect their social performance as well as their mental health. A gay man from Matale said, ‘After completing higher studies, my school friends created a WhatsApp group and on a random day, they started questioning my sexual orientation, my identity and on the whole asking who I am as a person. That day created an emotional trauma on me or it psychologically affected me’. A trans woman from Colombo said ‘If I access my social media account and posts, I fear to scroll down due to the displeasing comments and debates of our community. It causes burnouts and emotional breakdown and sets a feeling that why such technology should exist.’ An asexual man from Colombo shared an incident in which he was the victim of false charges through a fake video on social media that had gone viral.

That incident traumatized him and limited his social presence activities. One of the academics from Jaffna discussed that LGBTQIA+ individuals in Sri Lanka always face negative emotions, social pressure, exploitation, and other psychological issues on a major scale due to social media.

### *Verbal Harassment*

Verbal abuses are experienced by transgender individuals. They have been mocked by addressing them with derogatory names and terms like butterfly, toffee, nine, *ponnaya*, and many other names. There are instances where Facebook pages and hashtags are also created to make fun of the LGBTQIA+ community. Shana, a transgender woman from Puttalam said, 'I am using social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, X and Instagram and learning many new things daily. Furthermore, the negative part of social media is verbal harassment that was sent to us through voice notes or voice clips. These kinds of perpetrators should be punished in the court of law, then the approach of the society by and large will change.' It is observed that many LGBTQIA+ members receive voice notes or voice recordings of verbal abuse or verbal harassment through WhatsApp and Instagram. A trans woman from Colombo said, 'I have always been targeted through verbal harassment via Facebook and Facebook Messenger. Most of the comments on my posts on Facebook are homophobic'. Another trans woman from Batticaloa said, 'I deactivated my Facebook account because I received a huge volume of verbal abuse daily that amplified my depression'. From the grassroots, it was understood that on Facebook and Facebook Messenger, the perpetrators frequently share verbal harassment.

### *Sexual Exploitation*

A trans man from Colombo said, 'my dream is to pursue higher education, but I left my home due to societal pressure and had no financial support from others. During my tough times, I was sexually exploited

in return for monetary compensation.’ A conservative country like Sri Lanka does not accept the LGBTQIA+ community as part of society to the fullest. As a result, they face heavy discrimination at all levels of society, from education to livelihood. Thus, they experience financial hardships and lack resources for living. This situation leads to dependency on support and financial assistance, and when expecting help from others, they may be exploited and subjected to sexual abuse.

### *Non-Consensual Pornography*

The distribution of non-consensual pornography can take many forms, but each case has one thing in common: the offender has shared a private image of the victim without the victim’s consent. This issue is increasing in the modern era. Revenge porn can be called image-based violence. When relationships break, partners engage in image-based violence on social media. Not only former partners, but other perpetrators also engage in this forms of violence. A gay boy from Colombo said, ‘My former partner shared a private video of us on social media and sent the video to my family members via WhatsApp. Until he sent the private video, my family did not know about my sexual identity. After that, I faced many difficulties in my family and life.’ According to a survey in 2021, most LGBTQIA+ individuals have experienced sexually explicit image-based abuse in Sri Lanka. This produces feelings of social anxiety and social isolation among survivors, as well as detrimental to their social relationships. A trans woman on Instagram was exposed to a transphobic attack in Sri Lanka. She mentioned that she faces substantial abuse through Instagram messages, image-based violence, and violent threats from a stranger.

### *Trolling*

Trolling refers to intentional attempts to incite conflict and arguments on online platforms by posting inflammatory content. Trolls make random

and controversial comments or posts to provoke a negative reaction from the readers of the specific comment or post. A trans woman mentioned, 'to safeguard myself from trolling and personal attack, I always give confusing statements about my sexual orientation and gender identity. I have never mentioned it openly on my social media handles.' A lesbian woman from Kandy said, 'My parents are always facing verbal harassment from our society in social media because of me. I was actively involved in social media like Facebook, Instagram and Viber earlier, but now I am only a passive user. If I am a passive user, I can be more protective than an active user'. Some also said that trolls on social media make them feel down, upset, and angry. Trolling LGBTQIA+ activists is a common issue in Sri Lanka. Many activists said that 'the patriarchal mentality treats them like' and this also hampers their activism and personal life.

### *Stereotypes*

Stereotypes mainly have a negative impact on all members of the LGBTQIA+ population. Especially, gender stereotypes expect perfection from all genders. When people speculate about someone's gender identity or sexual orientation, they are creating a harmful stereotype based on the idea that all must present themselves in a certain way. A trans man from Kandy mentioned that the media representing us as goddesses also makes us distinct from humans. There is no need to represent transgender people as positive to the level of *goddesses* or as negative to the extent of *demons*. He verbatim refers to 'Please try to represent us (transgender people) as humans.' The people of Jaffna watch mainstream commercial Indian films, more specifically Tamil-language films. These films portray stereotyped men and women as part of the narrative. So, those who are exposed to these films expect the people, community and society at large to be as visualized in the film, including their outfit, personality, and inner self. When they cannot find the typecast in real life within the LGBTQIA+ community, social conflicts arise. These social conflicts take the shape of producing memes about them; thus, the power of patriarchy still dominates the daily life of LGBTQIA+ people.

## Sri Lankan Social Media Space: Positive Experiences and Outcomes

American singer Christopher Alan Young said ‘Social media is a very powerful tool. It also gives power to tools.’ On a positive note, social media cultivates many opportunities for the LGBTQIA+ community and supports positive queer self-representation. It is spreading a new wave in Sri Lanka beyond its borders.

### *LGBTQIA+ Identity and Entrepreneurship*

LGBTQIA+ people use social media to explore, conceal, protect, and express their identities. Even though there is oppression and discrimination, the queer community is expressing themselves most honestly in digital and online media. Social media has opened a platform for them to become self-made entrepreneurs, content creators, and influencers. A lesbian woman said Facebook and Instagram help her to advertise her products. So, innovative business strategies are formulated and executed through social media. Queer people and their enterprises go beyond geographical borders. A few start-ups have become medium-scale and large-scale industries that have clients across the globe. An activist said, ‘Compared with other South Asian countries, I have hardly seen trans people begging on the street or engaged in sex work. LGBTQIA+ community in Sri Lanka are doing diverse respectable jobs for their livelihoods such as modelling, tattoo, make-up and culture-based artists, engaged in small businesses and more with the help of social media, further they also describe that on social media platforms proudly. I can see this with pride.’ A trans woman from Colombo said she uses ‘Tiktok as an entertainment platform and she shares important messages through that and creates a self-image’. A trans man from Jaffna said, ‘Social media helped me to express my identity as a trans woman to the world’. Unlike the olden days when mass media and folk media were only the options and the voices of LGBTQIA+ people were not heard, information

and communication-based social media now provide a space where the LGBTQIA+ community can profess and develop their identities.

### *Well-being, Emotional Support, and Empowerment of the LGBTQIA+ Community*

Social media participation of the LGBTQIA+ community enhances their well-being and emotional support from other queer communities separated by geographic regions and language. It provides valuable support, especially helping those who experience exclusion in society. LGBTQIA+ community members have diverse hobbies, interests, and aspirations. They use various social media platforms to express their talents. Their colleagues and followers from the same community on social media encourage and motivate them. When LGBTQIA+ members face bullying and violence the queer community and groups on social media support them to overcome their problems and issues, it provides moral and counselling support. They also share their state of mind with other genuine people on social media beyond borders. Many organizations are working in Sri Lanka to support the LGBTQIA+ community. One of the directors of an LGBTQIA+ organization said, 'We maintain social media platforms to connect with queer people all over Sri Lanka and help them if they are in trouble'. She also said there are helplines introduced for LGBTQIA+ people and volunteers are available to support them and to provide solutions to solve their issues. Another activist from Colombo said that their organization collects donations through social media to support vulnerable members of the queer community. Through these kinds of activities, with the help of social media, the LGBTQIA+ community is supported and empowered.

### *Pride Walks, Events, and Awareness*

Sri Lanka's first pride walk started in 2005 near Taj Samudra (a five-star hotel in Colombo) and was attended by over 300 people. The LGBTQIA+

community in Sri Lanka celebrates *Pride Month* and showcases their diverse talents each year. This has been promoted by students and Gen Z on social media and it also spreads positive awareness among the youngsters of Sri Lanka. The 'Jaffna Pride' festival was celebrated recently, which highlights the issues and concerns of the LGBTQIA+ community of Jaffna. A short film competition was also conducted by the American Corner, Jaffna Transgender Network and <www.nadi.lk> as a part of the Jaffna Pride festival under the name 'Unity Beyond Struggle'. Organizers of 'Jaffna Pride' created a Facebook page to promote the queer festival. They utilize social media, especially Facebook and Instagram, to advertise and share information related to events such as the pride walk, short film competition and painting event, and urge everyone to be part of it. Furthermore, the winning short films are featured on social media platforms and have gained popularity. Following Jaffna Pride, Colombo Pride was also held, and the organizers also utilized social media to the fullest potential to bring awareness about the LGBTQIA+ community. A trans woman from Jaffna said, 'nowadays social media plays a prominent role to create awareness about LGBTQIA+ community. Social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Facebook encourage us to express and I have numerous followers on my social media account, so it is important to the process of breaking the belief that LGBTQIA+ people are supposed to be submissive, passive and voiceless in the so-called society'.

## Conclusion

The chapter provided thoughts on the Sri Lankan LGBTQIA+ community in connection with social media platforms, ethical dilemmas in the social media sphere in Sri Lanka, laws in Sri Lanka, queer activism and organizations, opportunities, and challenges. Gender minorities have experienced both positive and negative representation in the Sri Lankan landscape. Most of the LGBTQIA+ population in Sri Lanka uses social media, which allows them to easily create content, communicate

information and ideas in real time, protest, bring change, and build relationships in the virtual world. Many have identified opportunities through social media platforms. At the same time, online abuse, trolls, and challenges pose setbacks for their progress.

However, they also entail certain drawbacks. Many members of the LGBTQIA+ community have surmounted obstacles to affirm their identities, with social media providing a platform for exchanging experiences, extending support, fostering cross-border communication and accessing counselling services. The intersection of the LGBTQIA+ community and social media in Sri Lanka reveals a complex landscape marked by opportunities and challenges. Most of the interviewees have experienced online violence and threats via social media. The cyber violence they face through social media cruelly impacts their life in many ways. Cyberbullying is perpetrated against queer people in Sri Lanka. A huge amount of negative portrayals, cultural discrimination and prejudice against LGBTQIA+ people are displayed on social media. People mock them and call them with derogatory terms and names.

At the same time, social media platforms enhance the well-being and healthcare of queer people, provide jobs, education, and other opportunities and connect them with peers. Social media platforms enable connections among individuals of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities across geographical boundaries, offering multifaceted advantages. Most Sri Lankans' beliefs, values, and religion also influence their gender perspectives, adopting a patriarchal approach. Their dominant behaviours reflect themselves on virtual platforms too. Compared with gay people, lesbians face more and more violence on social media. Some lesbians are active on social media but they never express their gender identity.

The negative representations and impacts are a major problem in Sri Lanka. Transgender people are accepted by the Sri Lankan community to some extent. Even though people's perceptions reflect the representation of the LGBTQIA+ community on social media in the Sri Lankan landscape, social media serves as a beacon of hope and a crucial lifeline for the LGBTQIA+ community in Sri Lanka. Concerted efforts are necessary to mitigate the risks and ensure that these platforms can be leveraged for positive social change.

Most individuals use social media to empower themselves, engage in activism, and raise awareness and they have gained acceptance through their activities. Implementing policy reforms, improving digital literacy, and creating more inclusive and secure online environments are essential. There is a need for efforts to focus on the legal recognition and protection of LGBTQIA+ rights, awareness campaigns to combat online abuse and support systems to help individuals navigate digital spaces safely.

## Postscript

As we finalised the book volume, the Sri Lankan government gazetted the Online Safety Bill in September 2023. It introduced the Online Safety Act (OSA) No. 9 of 2024, which mandated an Online Safety Commission with sweeping powers to regulate the digital space. The OSA, rammed through parliament without meaningful consultation, represents one of the most sweeping threats to freedom of expression, privacy and democratic discourse in any jurisdiction globally. The law instead created a framework for expanded censorship, the evisceration of privacy, mass surveillance and authoritarian control that affects everyone from high-net-worth individuals and business leaders to trade unionists and academics. The OSA affects many individuals in Sri Lanka, more specifically the LGBTQIA+ community and their cyber security.

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