

# GOLDEN JUBILEE BEGINNINGS

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## Dissecting social networks: The truth about our commenting habits

MANNAN MASHHUR ZARIF

I joined social networking platforms fresh out of university. In the mid-2000s it seemed like the most happening thing to do. Failing to reap the pleasures of poking, or keeping my pet puppy, Whiskey, healthy — I felt I was a miserable virtual socialite.

A few months later, I called it quits.

Years later, I realised the true power social networks, namely Facebook, had garnered and felt compelled to jump-start my deactivated account. Everyone I knew was using it, and it seemed like the only mode of being on the 'same page.' I have been a loyal user ever since.

Today, still working from home with COVID-19 restrictions enforced globally, I find Facebook has made the world smaller, but our lives unfortunately more prone than ever to become the next reality show.

Facebook has now emerged as an accepted means of communication, and for the most common Bangladeshi, the social media platform of choice. It is safe to say that in the bewildering world of Likes, Comments, Shares and Emoji, we have safely cushioned our lives.

In social network terms, a comment can simply be considered one of the ways of engaging with an individual. And to experience untoward comments either directed at others, or right at us, has become part of today's social networking experience.

This very same negative comment culture is perhaps the most talked about affair of the past few years. With every passing day, as the grip of Facebook tightens, our lives become more and more affected by what becomes viral on social networks, and it is only natural that to engage, we post our comments. This

leaves a trace of the inner workings of our minds, and the 'comment culture' as a whole, leaves a footprint of our collective mind set.

Why use social media?

"I have built up my personal brand through the use of social media. I use it every day, and much of my work is around the social media platforms. We use this to

communicate within the team, and with our target audience. To sell our products and services. To promote and create more awareness for our products and services. To me, this is one of the best things that has happened in the technological innovation"

She also added, "Something is negative if I assign a negative meaning to it. I choose to not assign the negative meanings and I use FB in a positive light. I find FB to be useful for doing my work, it helps me connect and chat with people in an easier way than email

rampant abuse of democratic values everywhere, we see democracy in social media ridiculed and shredded into a dirty segment.

Expertise represented through newspaper articles and opinions are now being shredded into pieces through comments by relative layman. No topic under the sun is immune to comments from a 'smart layman' — from politics, economics, and religion, to what is a worthy attire to wear — to an extent that social media sites are now a pile of mile long comment sections, often spreading misinformation, even generating false news!

**Waging 'unholy' wars**

Sanaul Chowdhury, now retired, uses social network to keep in touch with family, friends, and the acquaintances he made in his long career as marine engineer. Recently, he made a series of visual updates in his profile, highlighting numerous examples of human sculptures in Islamic countries. He soon fell prey to online bashing from his social media friends. Some questioned his political allegiance, as if it was ever up for discussion, and what made it most hurtful was the religious bashing the retired engineer received because of his views.

Some cited scripture in favour of his posts; some did so to oppose his views. Others branded him an atheist.

**To cite another example —**

The wedding portrait of a friend got an unprecedented number of Likes; some individuals were kind enough to additionally greet him with congratulatory remarks, and his first note on marital bliss got shared a few times — all within a span of few hours.

Buried under the pile of positivity there was this one voice, from his in-law's side, that questioned their sense of 'decency' in getting married with the bride not in proper attire.

In the next few weeks, this voice followed every post, and their every move, only gaining strength as others joined in. Few objected to these untoward remarks, and soon his posts became a battleground of religious sermons.

"Embarrassed as I was with such negativity, the discomfort was more so in having people in my friends list who could bring religion into such a trivial matter.

Although the pictures were not of a personal nature, the subject matter was. And any comment regarding an otherwise typical Bangladeshi wedding costume, is uncalled for," said Atikur Rahman, 35.

**Where misogyny finds new levels**

From celebrities, to social media entrepreneurs to average women, most unambiguously state that they have been victims of abuse, at the least. Some say that they have been victims of sexual harassment. But are women the only victims of abuse in social networking sites?

Ghulam Sumdany Don said, "I think men, women, and also children are all victims of cyber bullying. Anyone who is in the cyber atmosphere can be a victim. I personally think, and frankly speaking, I have been mostly bullied because of my profession and NOT because I am a man!"

And perhaps, that is the difference and shows the inherent misogyny in our psyche.

Ashna Habib Bhabna is one who wears many hats. She is an accomplished actress, a national award-winning dancer, and a writer. Like many other celebrities, she too maintains a Facebook page, which in her case, has hundreds and thousands of followers.

"It is true that as actors, we work for our fans; upload images for them. I know I work for an audience," she said.



#TECHNOLOGY

A written (or spoken) statement that expresses an opinion about someone or something — a comment — has found a new (dark) meaning in social networking platforms like Facebook.

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— Ghulam Sumdany Don, 35, Professional Corporate Trainer.

People use Facebook for different reasons; from what was just a site for fun and frolic now can be serious business for many. And it is, extremely addictive!

The boon of Facebook is that it gives the opportunity to readily access 100 plus individuals that we need to coordinate with on a daily basis at the tip of our fingertips and in one platform.

We can access any media house, beyond borders and across the continents, within seconds. We can instantaneously get entertained as easily we can keep an eye on the happenings at the many groups that we have joined.

"I started off to be connected to my friends when I was a teenager, and also because back then, FB was trending. Now, FB is mostly for work, and staying connected to friends," says Adiba, a part-time lecturer.

Naaz Fahmida Ahsan has more serious approach to Facebook because of her profession.

"My work involves checking on the organisation's social handles and keeping an eye from a communications perspective. My usage is very frequent as I'm also part of various not-for-profits that largely operate in the digital space," she said.

The pandemic has witnessed a rise in F-commerce, and this can be attributed to the far-reaching popularity of Facebook in Bangladesh, where a staggering 19.7 percent of the entire population is now part of its userbase.

As far as engagement is concerned, different people expressed a wide range of opinions. Some are just casual users of the platform, while others use it regularly, almost on an hourly basis.

Nileema, 30, expressed herself saying, "I don't spend time commenting or engaging in public discourse with people in FB. If I say something, it is within a group of people with whom I have a shared interest or common background, for which, even if I say something — even something negative — people in the groups maintain kindness and zero tolerance for bullying. This ensures that it's a safe space for everyone."

or WhatsApp."

**Facebook — A democracy?**

In the initial years when the Internet became widely accessible to people, if someone wanted to voice their opinion, one had to start a blog, perhaps by signing up for a free site, and learn the HTML code. But even after all the hard work, one was still not sure

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whether his/her piece would be read, let alone applauded.

Fast forward a decade or so, and the Internet is now full of options to exert your opinion. From commenting on the articles published in newspapers or news portals, to sharing your '2 cents' on a status update, to a sort of rejoinder to a friend's comment — the options have now widened. And in this flood of comments, one sees untoward remarks obnoxiously floating for everyone to see.

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The purpose of having the comment section is inherently good. It makes social media a more democratic place where the otherwise voiceless entity gets to share his opinion.

This may have been true for a while, but today, just like the