



Article

Subversive Recipes for Communication for Development and Social Change in Times of Digital Capitalism

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Abstract: The era of digital capitalism poses conundrums for communication for development and social change scholarship and practice. On one hand, mainstream social media platforms are an increasingly ubiquitous element of the everyday media practices of growing portions of the global population. On the other, the profit-driven architectures can make these hostile spaces for progressive social change dialogues. While a burgeoning literature exists on the uses of social media as part of hashtag-activism and social movements, much less critical consideration has been given to NGOs' and civil society organizations' uses of capitalist-driven social media platforms in their development and social change efforts, and the challenges and compromises they navigate in this, consciously or not. This paper argues that meaningful uses of social media platforms for social change requires cultivating a hacker mindset in order to find tactics to subvert, resist, and appropriate platform logics, combined with an ecological sensibility to understanding media and communication. This paper analyzes how metaphors, specifically of a recipe, can offer a productive, praxis-oriented framework for fostering these sensibilities. The paper draws on insights from workshops with IT for Change, a civil society organization in India, which is both a leader in critiquing the political and economic power of Big Tech especially in the Global South, and beginning to use Instagram for its work on adolescent empowerment.

Keywords: communication for development; communication for social change; non-government organizations; social media; platformization; digital capitalism; India; participatory methods



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1. Introduction

Ahead of a visit as part of a research partnership, the communication team of the Indian NGO IT for Change (ITfC) asked if the exchange could include a workshop on the current thinking about using social media for social change. The team was already using Instagram and other platforms, and was particularly interested in exploring how these platforms can be used to best further the organization's agendas. ITfC is a non-profit based in Bengaluru, Karnataka, which, since its inception in 2000, has worked primarily in the areas of promoting feminist and Global South perspectives in understanding digital technologies, critiquing Big Tech, advocating for gender sensitivity to reduce different forms of gender-based violence, and integrating information and communication technologies (ICTs) within education systems and rural communities to empower marginalized women and girls. The focus of its work has been on understanding what digital technologies, informed by gender-sensitivity and social justice, can make possible. The communication team supports both the research and education sections of the organization. In asking the question of how to best use social media, the ITfC communication team were highly attuned to the profit interests of Big Tech and the algorithmic power they wield, but like many civil society NGOs, find a practical need to deploy these tools in their work.

This question points to a gap in our scholarship in the communication for development and social change (CDSC) field, and a paradox for practice. CDSC practices are taking

place in an environment where Big Tech platforms have increasing presence and power over flows of media and communication (Rodríguez et al. 2014; Enghel 2015; Thomas 2018). These spaces have become a basic element of the work of many NGOs, with varying levels of criticality, and with different purposes and objectives. Purposes range from reputation and branding communication, to advocacy, campaigning, behavior change communication, and community media. While there are many contradictions associated with using corporatized, profit-driven, extractivist social media platforms for progressive social justice purposes, there are simultaneously pragmatic reasons for using them, given their increasing ubiquity in everyday life. Engaging with the experience of ITfC is, therefore, particularly useful for advancing theorization of the use of social media platforms for social change, and for improving practices within the CDSC field at large.

This paper, co-authored by three ITfC practitioners and an academic researcher, aims to engage with and productively reflect on the tensions outlined. We reflect on what we learned together from workshops using creative methods to critically analyze and reflect on ITfC's social media for social change practice. We argue that meaningful uses of social media platforms for social change requires cultivating a 'hacker mindset' in order to find tactics to subvert, resist, and appropriate platform logics, combined with an ecological sensibility for understanding media and communication. This paper proposes metaphors, specifically of a recipe, as a productive and novel praxis-oriented conceptual tool for fostering these sensibilities.

2. Communicative, Digital, Informational Capitalism, and Social Change

Social media platforms, familiar sites of everyday communication for billions around the world, are enabled by and a tool for the commodification of networks, information, and communication. Digital capitalism is the political-economic transition towards an internet that principally serves the interests of corporations driven by neoliberalism (Schiller 1999). Although there are differences in some of the dominant conceptualizations of digital capitalism (Pace 2018), it is useful to understand it as both a continuation of capitalism as an economic and social structure (Fuchs 2022) and also as a radically new 'epoch' driven by social and technological change underpinned by neoliberal policies (Schiller 1999; Pace 2018). Data commodification is one of the key mechanisms, with the relationship between the corporate drive towards data extraction being linked to the historical co-dependence between colonialism, capitalism, and natural resource extraction (Couldry and Mejias 2019). These processes are increasingly 'platformized', referring to the power of intermediary digital infrastructures to not just facilitate but also to shape socioeconomic, cultural, and political cultural production and interaction (Nieborg and Poell 2018; van Dijck et al. 2018). Platforms emerged as a business model for accessing, owning, and commodifying data, emerging as "a new business model, capable of extracting and controlling immense amounts of data, and with this shift, we have seen the rise of large monopolistic firms" (Srnicek 2017, p. 6). The power of monopolistic corporate actors under digital capitalism is not just in their surveillance and commercialization opportunities, but also, according to Dean (2009, 2019), in the discursive depoliticization of society under communicative capitalism. Dean's communicative capitalism refers to the ways that the fantasies of ideals such as access, inclusion and participation, coinciding with corporatization, financialization, and privatization, capture progressive resistance and accelerate global capitalism (Dean 2009, 2019). Platformization within the broader context of digital and communicative capitalism is a vital conceptual framework for analyzing contemporary contexts and practices of social change communication, both within NGOs and civil society organizations and in activists and social movement spaces. The literature addressing commodification, platformization, and social media in these two contexts is now considered.

2.1. NGOs, Social Media, and Communication for Development and Social Change

There has been something of a ‘blindspot’ in theorizing and addressing the challenges of communicative and digital capitalism in the field of CDSC (Rodríguez et al. 2014; Enghel 2015). Indeed, Kim and Lee’s (2023) meta-analysis of literature from the closely related field of ICT for Development over the 2009–2019 period, which updates earlier meta-analyses (e.g., Fair and Shah 1997; Ogan et al. 2009), attests that the majority of studies (75.3%) did not engage in any way with issues of globalization, privatization, and political economic imperatives at all, and few engaged in detail. Kim and Lee’s study also found that only 9.3% of the total sample looked at social media, indicating a serious lack of attention to this intersection of factors.

When NGOs use social media, current research indicates that they typically use it as a one-way information dissemination tool (Comfort and Hester 2019). Comfort and Hester state that “The very qualities of the social media platform that allows it to give voice to counter-publics makes it a difficult to control arena” which, although possibly being attractive for activists, “intimidates professionalized and more cautious NGOs” (Comfort and Hester 2019, p. 282). Similar findings, indicating a predominance of the use of social media for organizational communication, have emerged in studies of Spanish NGOs’ uses of social media (Iranzo and Farné 2014), uses by bilateral agencies (Kim and Wilkins 2021), and when comparing social media usage by Spanish and Chilean NGOs (Montes 2024). In this vein, Danyi and Chaudhri’s (2020) chapter in the *Handbook of Communication for Development and Social Change* discusses social media strategies for NGOs, drawing heavily on PR how-to guides and focusing on leveraging social media in aid of the reputation and branding of NGOs.

There are examples of empirical studies that examine the efficacy of social media for social and behavior change messaging. A meta-analysis of research published from 2017 to 2021 on the use of social media for ‘knowledge sharing’ included 57 such papers in the review (Ihsaniyati et al. 2023), where the majority focused on the health and education sectors. Studies of social media health promotion efforts have been found to depend on expert-driven information transmission and limited participatory engagement approaches (Fayoyin 2016), in keeping with a default to a one-way information dissemination approach to social media by NGOs (Comfort and Hester 2019). Other studies simply show how approaches like the Sabido methodology for edutainment can be appropriated for transmedia storytelling, including via social media (Sengupta et al. 2020; Rajendram et al. 2021). In the context of this discussion, it is important to note that these studies offer little to no mention of the privatized, commodified nature of the platforms being used, or reflect on any implications for their audiences or their own organizations, suggesting they assume social media platforms to be neutral tools, equal to any other option in the toolbox. From these types of studies it is apparent that there are low levels of criticality by NGOs using these platforms.

Notably, much of the key work arguing for the need for CDSC theory to approach digital media critically has tended to turn attention to social movements (e.g., Thomas 2018; Farné et al. 2022; Enghel 2023). For example, Farné, Cerqueira, and Nos-Aldás argue that an “activist communication perspective” that includes attention to communication practices in both structured (e.g., NGO) and fluid (e.g., social movement) spaces in civil society represents an advance in the field. In this context, they argue for “communication and activist literacies” that:

are understood as the ability to make effective communication for social change that contributes to transgressing oppressive hegemonic frames and promoting alternative discourses that engage citizens for equality and social justice. (Farné et al. 2022, p. 308)

However, while activist social movements’ contexts and literatures indeed offer a constructive ‘laboratory’ for new thinking in CDSC, especially as it relates to the digital (Tufte 2017; Thomas 2018), there is a need to close the loop and consider how those experiences and theories can inform and challenge the practices on development and

social change NGOs. Currently there are very few articles or chapters that bridge the study areas of activism, CDSC, and social media usage and challenges in relation to civil society and NGO practices. Some examples that indicate the potential value of this, for instance, include reflections of the opportunities of memes and humor and other forms of (trans)media storytelling suited to social media for civil society NGO CDSC (Nos Aldás 2015; Campos 2023), and work that conceptualizes algorithms and hashtags as ‘non-human actors’ that civil society actors interact with in their communication efforts (Etter and Albu 2021). Before turning to our case, we review in more detail some of the literature on activist uses and appropriations of social media, which was used to orient the ITfC workshop discussions.

2.2. *Activist Appropriations of Social Media Platforms*

There is a growing literature exploring the practices of activists under digital and communicative capitalism, including forms of algorithmic appropriation aimed at gaining some agency over algorithms (Treré and Bonini 2022) and to subvert datafication, including for purposes other than those intended by Big Tech (Beraldo and Milan 2019). This literature was crucial to inspiring our thinking around ITfC’s own uses and appropriations of social media for gender equality and social justice.

Algorithms process and filter content, “determining who and what gains visibility on social media” (Cotter 2019, p. 89). The precise ways that the platforms’ algorithms work are highly opaque, described as a ‘black box’ or ‘secret sauce’ (Treré 2018; Reviglio and Agosti 2020; Cotter 2021). Examples of some of the data elements feeding into the ranking and filtering on different platforms may include recency, originality, levels of engagement by users, language of the content, the number of followers of the creator, the history of interactions between creators and other users, and trending topics and hashtags (Velkova and Kaun 2021; Fouquaert and Mechant 2022; Mahoney 2022; Sued et al. 2022), but also the trails of data we leave when we “shop, browse, watch, play, and interact online” (Cotter 2019, p. 898). Using social media for activism and social change clearly opens a series of paradoxes, contradictions, and traps. Not only are activists subjected to data surveillance, but the algorithms also work on the users as a “disciplining apparatus” (Bucher 2012), where users are coaxed to “play the visibility game” (Cotter 2019). The platforms’ datafication techniques feedback data (likes, shares, analytics) to individuals and organizations (Treré and Bonini 2022), and these underpinning logics cultivate and reward practices of self-branding, competition, and popularity, resulting in complex dilemmas that activists negotiate. Particularly interesting analyses of this collision have emerged in studies of “platformized feminism” (Barbala 2022) where the algorithm of platforms such as Instagram “rewards images which display and validate neoliberal ideals and constructions of femininity” (Mahoney 2022, p. 522), where ‘influencer activists’ are “forced to adhere to the neoliberal logics of individualism and self-governance encoded in platform affordances” (Semenzin 2022, p. 120).

When activists choose to use mainstream social media, they are in many ways “stuck with the algorithm”, both in terms of the way it is unavoidably built into the platform and getting stuck in their efforts due to the lack of transparency of the algorithm (Sorce 2023, p. 215). However, activists can respond by developing competence with vernaculars (shared conventions and grammars) and algorithmic resistance (Sued et al. 2022). Tactics to appropriate algorithms for activist purposes require building knowledge of how the algorithms work, often through trial and error (Treré 2018; Treré and Bonini 2022). Treré and Bonini (2022) outline a typology of three types of algorithmic activism: amplification, evasion, and hijacking. Amplification is the deployment of tactics to use algorithms to spread information, and gain visibility and narrative capacity (ibid). The authors give the example of ‘hacking’ the twitter algorithm through using a massive internal communication process to coordinate timings for using the new hashtags to trigger a new trending topic. A more basic example is discussed by Sorce (2023) in relation to the Fridays For the Future movement, which used tactics learned through trial and error, such as putting hashtags in

comments rather than in the posts, and networked efforts to like posts, to enhance visibility. Evasion refers to tactics to avoid censorship, for example, replacing letters with characters ('v@xine') and posting links in comments rather than posts, since posts are more subject to censoring (Treré and Bonini 2022). Other examples include feminists placing emojis in front of intimate body parts, and changing the gender option on their profile from female to male (Barbala 2022). Hijacking refers to disrupting and subverting another person's or company's social media, for example, by flooding right-wing hashtags with K-Pop (Treré and Bonini 2022).

3. Case and Context: The Emergence of *Kishori Adda* on Instagram

Our reflection and analysis in this paper focuses on a social media handle that was part of the ITfC's adolescent girl empowerment program. Since 2019, *Hosa Hejje Hosa Dishe* (H2HD—translated into 'New Step in New Direction') has been working with adolescent girls in government and government-aided schools in the south Indian state of Karnataka. The program envisions building their life skills to empower them with greater aspiration, articulation, and agency. H2HD has also worked with school teachers to sensitize them towards the specific needs of adolescents, and therefore, improve their responsiveness towards their students.

When it comes to understanding trends in smartphone use by adolescent girls in peri-urban and rural India, statistical overviews and euphoric claims of 'empowerment' have tended to present a misleading picture, ignoring the reality that "women's access to devices and connections continues to be limited or heavily policed" (Gurumurthy and Bharthur 2024, p. 285). That said, from a practitioner perspective, it was clear that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced a rapid change. Classrooms made a massive shift to the online space. Access to smartphones and other technological devices were now a necessity for school-goers across the country. This led to a manifold increase in the number of young people who were active on the internet. Especially for adolescent girls, the internet posed a double-edged sword. While it became a platform for self-expression, it also exposed them to an unprecedented degree of risks such as cyber violence and misinformation.

In 2021, H2HD conducted an online course 'Facilitating Adolescent Empowerment for Social Justice' for teachers. Through the six cohorts of teachers, a common concern that arose was the unbridled access their students had to the internet. While the concern brought to light an important phenomenon, it also reflected the dominant mindset towards young people accessing the internet. Although the smartphone is radical in that it makes self-expression possible for adolescent girls, access to it is determined largely by the adults around them (Gurumurthy and Bharthur 2024; Tacchi and Chandola 2015). The girls who use smartphones and access the internet through them often face heightened monitoring, judgment, and outright permission denial from parents, teachers, and older siblings.

An internal focus group discussion with adolescent girls on social media usage revealed that the girls enjoyed the spaces of expression offered by the internet. By creating content, uploading photos and videos, sharing memes, and watching films the girls sought the internet for leisure as well. However, they also shared the challenges in navigating the digital space. They shared that they received unsolicited messages and faced different kinds of harassment online that led to them censoring themselves or refraining from using the internet. The discussion also reflected the lack of help and support to navigate such a complex space.

In the realm of articulation and expression as necessary for empowerment, safety on the internet therefore proved to be an undeniable aspect. While the life skills curriculum of the H2HD program includes a module on cyber safety, the need for an alternate space to counter the violence of mainstream online spaces was urgent. This led to the creation of the *Kishori Adda* handle on Instagram.

Kishori Adda

Kishori Adda (@kishoriadda, which translates to ‘Adolescent Girl Hangout’) is a handle co-created by the H2HD program team along with adolescent girls. Based on the internal focus group discussion, Instagram was the most popularly accessed social media platform, and hence, chosen to host it. The themes of the posts cut across gender, health, aspiration, and identity—all areas of interest expressed by the girls. The discussion also highlighted the formats they most enjoyed watching—reels, carousels, and stories—and the page employs all three. Keeping in mind that leisure is an important aspect of the internet experience, the page balances information with memes based on pop culture and interactive quizzes. Since its launch in March 2023, the page has seen a steady growth in engagements and followers, with 149,590 impressions as of March 2024.

As with other social media handles, campaigns are an important part of Kishori Adda. The handle ran its first social media campaign, *Samanatheya Sambramada Abhiyana* (The Joyous Celebration of Equality), in October 2023. It explored the relevance of equality for adolescent girls, and brought together diverse perspectives of equality such as lived experiences of inequality, aspirations for a more equal world, the constitutional right to equality, and historic movements for social justice. The campaign had over 16,000 impressions, with participation from adolescent girls, educators, parents, lawyers, and the program team. The second campaign is scheduled for the end of February based on the theme of overcoming patriarchy.

The second campaign, *Purushapradhanate Meeri Horadu Kishori* (Overcome Patriarchy and March On, Kishori), took place in March 2024. With 9072 impressions, it featured adolescent girls sharing their understanding of patriarchy, and building a support group for themselves to overcome it. Girls from residential schools spoke about overcoming patriarchy by studying away from their homes. The campaign also featured a public health doctor highlighting the role nutrition and health play in the lives of adolescent girls to achieve their dreams, and a development professional who discussed the impact of patriarchy on men and masculinity.

4. Methodology and Approach

The research used a methodology informed by visual, participatory, action-based, and creative methods (Foster 2015; Tacchi 2015; Gubrium and Harper 2016; Kara 2020), seeking to generate contextual and rich understandings through collaboration, creativity, and reflection. This paper is part of a larger research project that used symbols, metaphors, and other modes of poetic thinking. The approach takes inspiration from Eisner’s (1991, p. 227) notion of metaphoric precision, which proposes that “nothing is more precise than the artistic use of language” (Foster 2015, p. 64). Metaphors and allegories can be useful for uncovering and recovering non-Western ways of knowing, in ways that refuse “the dualism between the real and the unreal, between realities and fictions” (Law 2004, p. 139). Metaphors have been successfully used in interviews in the context of health and development projects (Fletcher 2013), and in workshops (Dalton 2020). Alongside some traditional data gathering methods, such as interviews and participant observation, the core data for this paper come from a creative workshop focused on answering the question: how can civil society NGOs use social media platforms for social change? This question emerged from practice-based experiences of Authors 2, 3, and 4, and intersects with wider scholarly debates (Rodríguez et al. 2014; Enghel 2015; Thomas 2018).

Author 1 generated the concept for the three creative arts-based workshops during her 14 day visit to ITfC as part of an 18-month collaboration. The workshop focused on here involved the wider ITfC communication team, including two people who are also part of the H2HD team, and focused on the Kishori Adda Instagram account, and specifically, the *Samanatheya Sambramada Abhiyana* (Joyous Celebration of Equality) campaign, a 10-day gender-equality campaign targeting adolescents that was running live at the time of the workshop.

The workshop began with a short discussion of some of the concepts and tensions discussed in the literature on NGO and activist uses of social media. The ITfC workshop participants were then tasked with looking at their social media posts and thinking metaphorically about what kind of ‘meal’ it is, and with trying to reverse engineer a ‘recipe’. This tool for a reflexive engagement with a social media post and the organization’s wider practices took inspiration from [Treré’s \(2018\)](#) brief metaphorical explanation of how algorithms work, that algorithms are a bit like a recipe: the ‘meal’ is the end product of a set of ingredients, with a step-by-step process that explains the quantities, order and timing of mixing and cooking the ingredients ([Treré 2018](#), pp. 165–166). In the workshop, we combined the recipe metaphor with an ecological approach to communication. The notion of communicative ecology here is wider than ‘media ecology’ ([Scolari 2012](#); [Treré 2018](#)), and is understood to encompass the dynamic interplay of media, tools, or platforms, and their affordances and constraints, the nature of the content or information itself, and the social and cultural context ([Slater 2014](#); [Tacchi et al. 2019](#)). Within the recipe metaphor, the ecological approach can expand our attention to considering the nature of the ingredients and tools (their provenance, social/cultural meanings, and signifiers), the tools or technologies involved, and their connections with social and cultural customs relating to food and meals, and the social practices around the meal itself: habits, rituals, customs, and sociality. In this way, the meals and the recipe were devised to capture the interaction of the content, the technological or platform dimensions, and the social dimensions of communicative ecologies, and to articulate the intentions and results of the interactions with the algorithms and audiences.

5. Recipes for Five Meals

A total of five meals and recipes were created: two were created in the workshop, and a further three were developed in follow-up discussions. Each meal and accompanying recipe serves as a heuristic for analyzing one element of the overall campaign, bringing attention the NGO’s interaction with non-human actors (such as algorithms and hashtags) as well as human and social dimensions of communicative ecologies in their efforts to resist and subvert the platform logics and use social media for social change. We begin by sharing the five recipes, including the ingredients (content), the method (platform tactics and vernaculars), and the serving suggestion and meal description (the sociality), before analyzing the insights with attention to key communicative ecology dimensions.

5.1. Recipe 1—*Yaakavva Yaakavva* (*Why Mother, Why Is It So?*), ‘A Comfort Meal’ (*Figure 1*)

5.1.1. Ingredients

- A moving human voice;
- Traditional/community song with a simple tune;
- Powerful, emotive lyrics that tell a vulnerable story about a collective experience;
- Lyrics that are rooted in the feeling of being discriminated against, not a moral message that people might be ‘numbed’ to;
- Bright, attractive colors;
- Stripped back presentation, without clutter and sensory overload;
- English subtitles;
- Trending hashtags;
- Stickers and gifs to signify the post is not a static image.

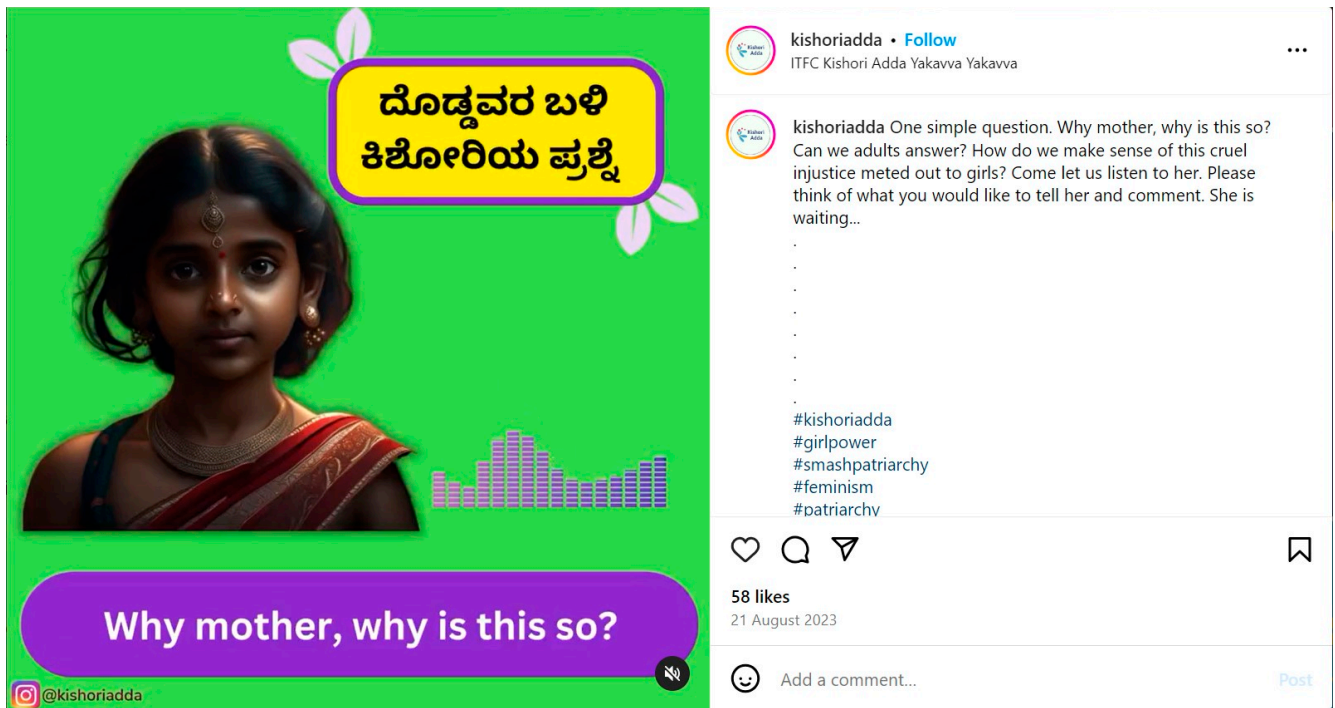


Figure 1. Screenshot of the Yaakavva Yaakavva (which translates to Why mother, why is it so?) post on the @Kishoriadda Instagram handle.

5.1.2. Methods

1. As the primary content is in the audio format, choose the reel format. The reel is chosen over the standard video format as the current Instagram algorithm prioritizes reels.
2. Use bright, attractive colors in the design; sticking to the Kishori Adda aesthetic that appeals to adolescent girls. Also, for the post to stand out in any follower's feed, so the engagement increases thereby triggering the algorithm to boost the post to more audiences.
3. Add a gif of a sound wave that plays on loop throughout the duration of the song. This is another sign of audio content in the post.
4. Add English subtitles to the song which offers the extra reach to non-Kannada-speaking audiences, and therefore, increase the extra shares and likes to amplify the post in more people's timelines.
5. Add an English caption and popular/trending hashtags as the algorithm favors text in English.
6. Share the reel via stories with a 'Sound on' sticker, so the audiences who watch stories know there is some interesting audio we want to draw their attention to.
7. As soon as the post is shared, 'like' it from all staff accounts, as early engagement triggers the algorithm to help share the post.
8. 'Share' the post with followers of staff members, who will therefore engage with the post with their 'likes' and comments.

5.1.3. Serving Suggestion

Non-provoking in any manner, this reel can be shared with or viewed by parents and other adults who monitor the content adolescent girls view or engage with on the internet.

The 'Yaakavva Yaakavva' reel is a comfort meal. It combines the elements of the powerful lyrics and simple tune of a community song, with a moving, human voice. The central ingredient of this meal is a Kannada song, 'Yaakavva Yaakavva', passed down through generations of women, its lyrics asking why a girl cannot have the kind of life

her brother has. It expresses the anguish she feels in being discriminated against. All adolescent girls—the primary audience of Kishori Adda—experience patriarchy, but may not have a chance to express how it makes them feel. When they watch this reel and hear the song, it may resonate with their own questions. It could offer them solidarity in being heard, and in addressing the loneliness they might be feeling. The comfort meal metaphor is apt also because the song is not a transfer of knowledge about the system of patriarchy, but centers the feelings of a young girl. The quality of the song, its unique focus, and the design of the reel make it comforting as well as pleasant to look at.

5.2. Recipe 2—Piranha Quiz, ‘A Healthy Snack’ (Figure 2)

5.2.1. Ingredients

- Trivia titbit that is interesting but not widely known;
- Simple and engaging language to explain the trivia;
- Attractive colors in the design;
- Trending music;
- English caption;
- Trending hashtags.

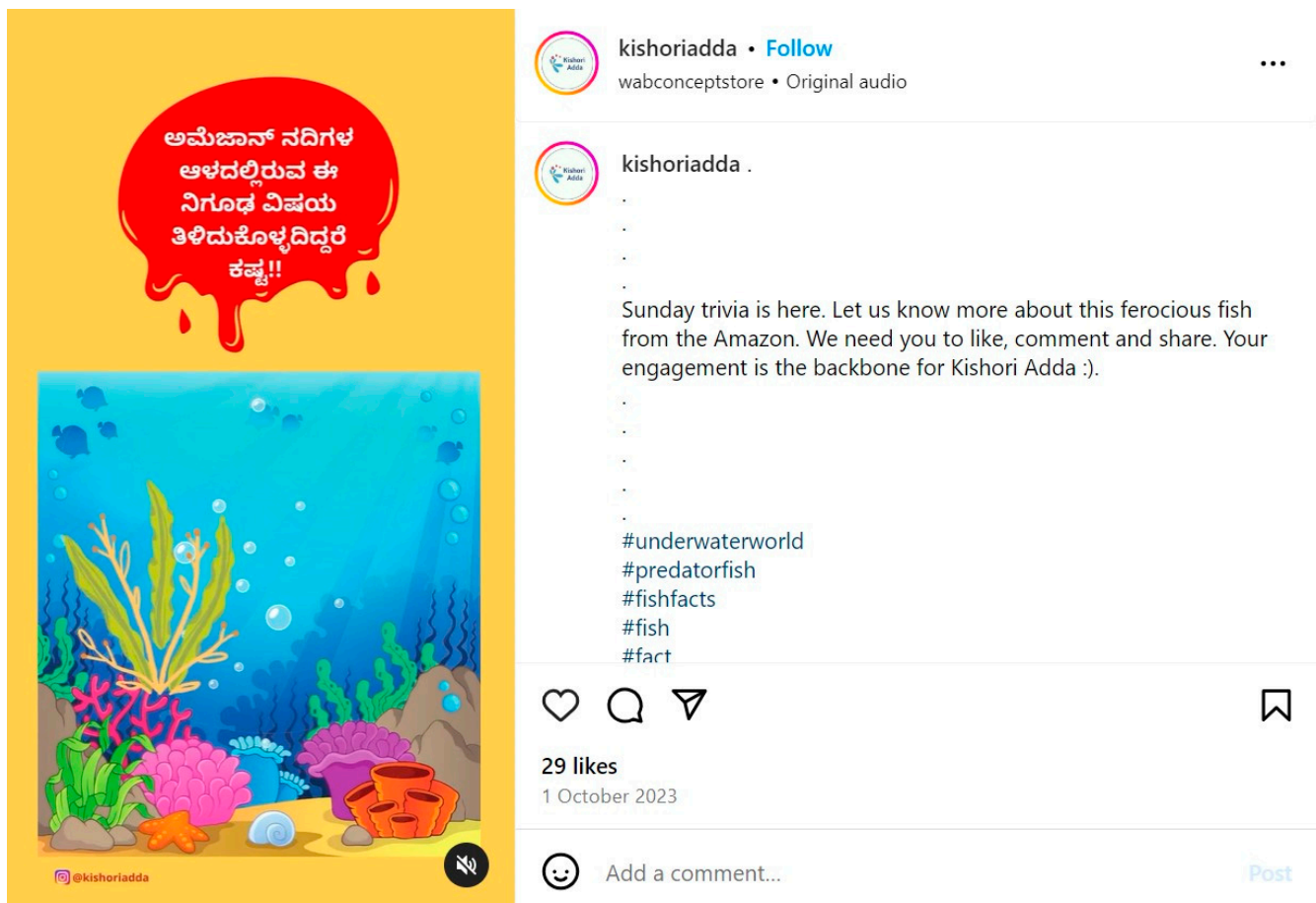


Figure 2. Screenshot of the piranha quiz post on the @Kishoriadda handle.

5.2.2. Method

1. Since reels are better promoted by the Instagram algorithm over static carousels, the format of the reel is chosen for the content.
2. Strike a balance between text and visuals in every slide to avoid visual clutter.
3. As the slides are part of a video, set an appropriate duration for each slide so the audience can read every one of them.

4. Add music that is popular on Instagram as the algorithm will boost content that uses these music clips.
5. Write the caption in English and add relevant hashtags to harness the algorithm to give more traction to the reel.
6. Share the reel via stories for the audience who check stories, so they visit the post.
7. When the post is shared, staff members should engage with it through 'likes', 'shares', and 'comments', to trigger the Instagram algorithm as well as draw in the members' followers to engage with the post.

Amidst meals of varied portions, a snack brings the much-needed lightness without messing with the palate or appetite. The reel about piranha fish was that snack. It served as a break amidst the more serious content that focusses on themes gender, identity, technology, health, and aspiration. Designed attractively with trending music, this reel kept up the regular audience engagement by still offering new 'information' but packaged in a lighter, more fun way.

5.3. Recipe 3—Trolling, 'A Table Spread/Buffer' (Figure 3)

5.3.1. Ingredients

- Viral content from 'troll pages' in Kannada;
- Ideas of gender, violence, and safety;
- Tips for girls to resort to if they experience trolling (such as helplines and reaching out to the cyber-crime police);
- Lucid language;
- Minimalist, attractive design;
- English captions;
- Trending hashtags.



Figure 3. Screenshot of the trolling post on the @Kishoriadda Instagram handle.

5.3.2. Method

1. As this post is going to discuss trolling through perspectives on gender, violence, and safety, a format that allows for such elaborate explanation—the carousel—is chosen.
2. A minimalist design to balance the heavy text is essential in order to avoid visual clutter. The aesthetic is still colorful—keeping with Kishori Adda's style.
3. The language used is simple and easy to understand. Also, it does not sound threatening, which might scare adolescent girls and stop them from using the internet.
4. Arrange the content so that it has a logical flow of argument, and identify how much text goes on every slide. Following the metaphor of the spread or buffet, the portion on every slide could vary but every slide tries to be a unit of information in itself.
5. Add images of content from pop culture that were part of viral troll pages so the girls are able to relate to such a complex idea.
6. The final slide has redressal tips if anyone faces trolling on the internet. This is essential for young girls to empower their journeys in the online space.
7. Write a caption in English and use relevant hashtags to trigger the algorithm to spread the post.
8. Share the post on the stories so the audience are directed to the post.
9. Ask staff members to 'like' the post and 'share' it among their friend circles to increase engagement.

The carousel post on trolling can be compared to a spread or buffet. Delving into a serious issue faced by adolescent girls online, the post unpacks what trolling means and looks at its gender, violence, and safety aspects. As active users of the internet and social media, adolescent girls know what trolling is but this post offers new lenses for them to better understand the phenomenon. Using examples of viral content from popular Kannada 'troll pages', the complex nexus of gender, violence, and safety is explained in a relevant manner for the girls to understand easily. The metaphor of the spread or buffet is also tied to the format of the carousel in two ways. One, each slide of the carousel is designed like a paragraph. Some slides may have more text than another one. Like the varied portions of food in a spread, the slides are not uniform in their design, but are connected to the larger theme of the post. Two, the audience can take their own time to read each slide and swipe through, unlike a reel in which slides are set to a specific duration. As in a spread, if every slide is a dish in the spread, the audience takes their time to relish it.

5.4. Recipe 4—Attraction, 'A Refreshing Lemonade' (Figure 4)

5.4.1. Ingredients

- The idea of attractions;
- A story format;
- Images of popular Kannada actor Yash;
- Lucid language;
- Attractive design;
- Trending music on Instagram;
- English caption;
- Trending hashtags.

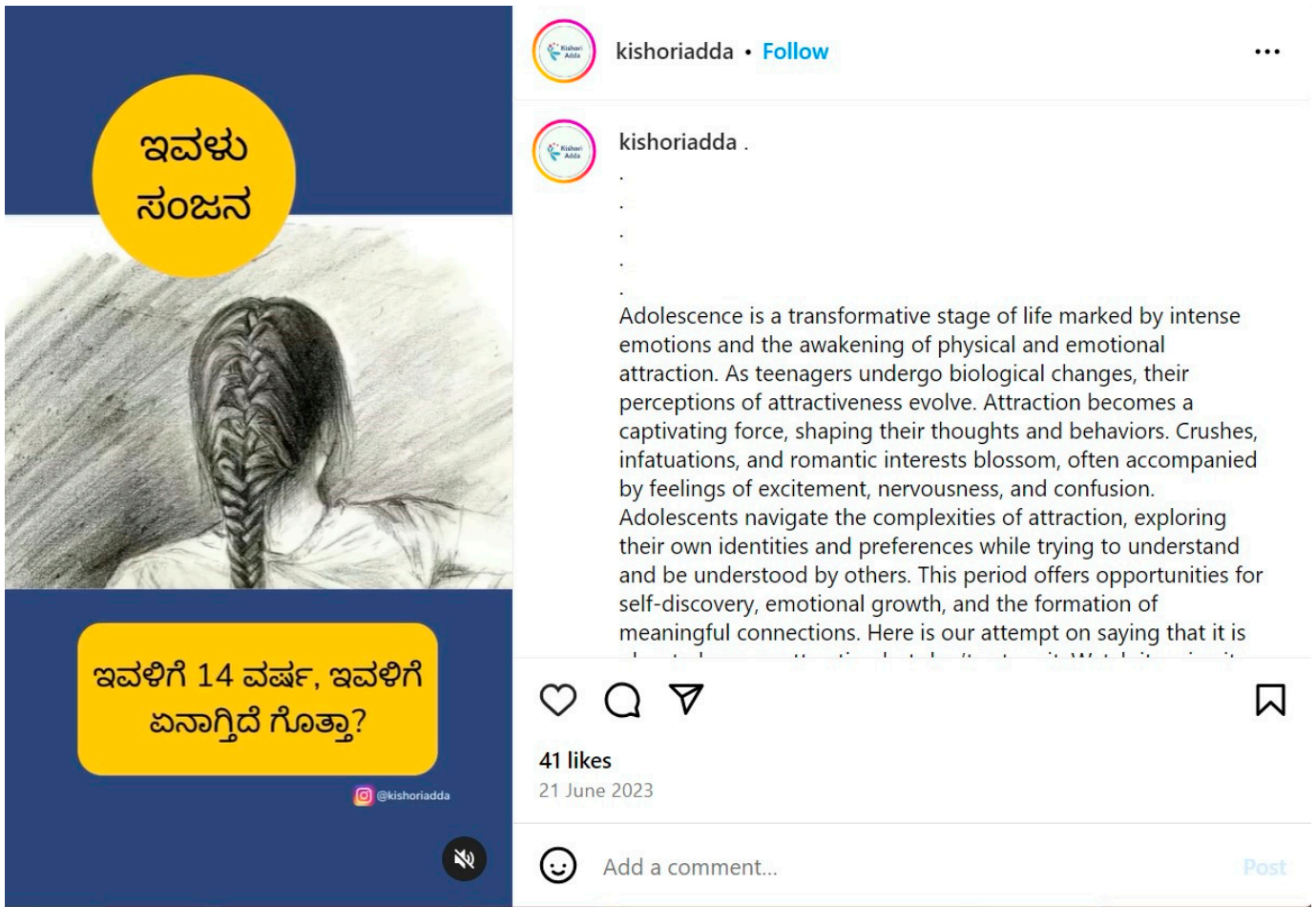


Figure 4. Screenshot of the attraction post on the @Kishoriadda Instagram handle.

5.4.2. Method

1. As the content is bite-sized, and reels are favored by the algorithm and the girls, choose the reel format.
2. Use images and stickers that are fun and relatable to also set the tone of the post.
3. Write a catchy question in the first slide to make the girls curious to watch the rest of the reel.
4. Image of Yash—a Kannada actor who is a heart-throb, especially among young women.
5. Ensure the language is not judging or talking down to girls for feeling attracted to celebrities or their classmates. It is a reminder to prioritize their education and health as necessary.
6. Balance the amount of text and design elements in every slide, as each of them are set to last for a specific duration on the screen.
7. Use a song that is popular in reels across Instagram so the algorithm helps to push the post more widely.
8. Add an English caption, and trending hashtags, so the algorithm will again help promote the post.
9. Share the post in stories with a sticker saying 'New Reel' so people click on the reel to watch it.
10. Encourage the team members, members in the organization and friends to 'like' and 'share' the post so its engagement grows.

A refreshing lemonade that is a light, quick drink with a tinge of sourness. Designed in the reel format, the post on attractions during adolescence addresses feeling drawn

to celebrities and classmates as normal. Unlike the usual reactions girls face of shaming, censoring, and denial to accessing technology or public spaces, the post normalizes these feelings but also advises girls not to act on every spark they feel for someone. The reel is in an engaging story format, uses examples of popular Kannada actors and features trending music on Instagram. The slight sourness a lemonade gives its drinker can be compared to the awkwardness girls might feel because of the openness with which attraction is discussed here. Often, these conversations are secrets between friends.

5.5. Recipe 5—Vamps in Television Serials, 'A Sandwich' (Figure 5)

5.5.1. Ingredients

- Female character tropes from popular Kannada soap operas;
- Lucid language;
- Bright colors;
- Viral music;
- English caption;
- Trending music.



Figure 5. Screenshot of the vamps in television serials post on the @Kishoriadda Instagram handle.

5.5.2. Method

1. As reels are the most sought-after format on Instagram, plan the content to suit this format.
2. Using images of popular female characters from television serials in Kannada to explain the concept of tropes—conspiring mother-in-law, cunning daughter-in-law, and jealous girlfriend.
3. Tie the above tropes to the larger system of patriarchy and how portrayals of women are significant in shaping cultural attitudes towards them. It is important to explain this simply, so adolescent girls understand these stereotypes as harmful.
4. Design the content in vibrant colors to make it pop out on the Instagram feed.
5. Add a viral song that is popularly used on Instagram to complete the reel.
6. Add an English caption and trending hashtags for the algorithm to boost the post.
7. Share the post via stories so people who miss it on their feeds see that new content has been shared on the handle.
8. Encourage members in the team and larger organization and personal contacts to ‘like’ and ‘share’ the post so its engagement increases.

A sandwich is a meal one sinks one’s teeth into. The joy of the sandwich lies in going to the heart of it. While the bread slices are part of a larger loaf of bread, the filling can change with each sandwich. The reel on decoding female character tropes in soap operas works similarly. While it is discussing the larger issue of patriarchy, it specifically looks at one of its manifestations. Featuring characters from popular Kannada soaps, this attractive reel encourages girls to observe the patriarchy in their own daily lives.

6. Analysis: Social Media Vernaculars and Platform Tactics

6.1. Content Dimensions

One of the strengths of the recipe metaphor is that it shows how interconnected the choices of ingredients, or content dimensions, are with the tools and technologies involved in the assembly and production of the meal, as well as the consumption. The content, or the ‘ingredients’, on Kishori Adda is created with an eye to both the adolescent girls and their tastes and interests, and the filtering and ranking processes of the Instagram algorithms. The content is co-created with adolescent girls, drawing from some of the offline Kishori Clubs, and the team’s decisions on content, aesthetics, and format are based on what the girls have expressed. This commitment to engaging in co-creation draws on the organization’s experience with community media, adapted to the social media space. This enables the content to strike a balance between introducing girls to concepts of gender, patriarchy, safety, and identity, while ensuring the content is attractive and relevant.

The content draws on vernaculars of social media, such as memes ([Sued et al. 2022](#); [Campos 2023](#)), and the local pop cultures, often subverting the original meaning to engage in topics of patriarchy and equality. The reel on vamps (recipe 5, the sandwich) is an example of this. This post, featuring characters and scenes from mainstream TV serials, is intended to build critical literacies and support girls to engage in critical reading of the patriarchal tropes in media, for example, how qualities of goodness are associated with male protagonists while qualities of malice and cruelty are associated with female antagonists. The post encourages girls to pay attention to what they watch, and thus, creates a space that encourages reflection in everyday life. In the neoliberal, patriarchal space of Instagram, this itself can be seen as a feminist act, akin to [Mahoney’s \(2022\)](#) example of visibilizing diverse bodies that challenge normative, gendered beauty standards.

6.2. Social Dimensions

The Kishori Adda content is created sensitive to the social contexts of its consumption, social dynamics that are both online and offline. One example of this is practices of evading censorship. While tactics like replacing letters with characters (v@ccine, r*pe) may work for evading platform censorship ([Barbala 2022](#); [Treré and Bonini 2022](#)), the recipes highlight an awareness that the access adolescent girls have to social media is often mediated and

regulated by adults in their lives, and adult censorship is more powerful in this context than algorithmic censorship. For example, in *Yaakavva Yaakavva* (recipe 1, the comfort meal), the lyrics of the song reflect the helplessness of a young girl, but do not encourage girls to break free from their homes or societal norms. The song is addressed to a mother figure ('avva' meaning 'mother'), creating an atmosphere of intimacy. Often, mothers are not the most powerful figures in familial and social settings, and therefore, the song does not trigger any conflict from more powerful figures such as fathers or older brothers who might be mediating the access of girls to social media. Similarly, discussing attractions can be a red flag for parents. The reel (recipe 4, lemonade) uses the image of Yash—a Kannada film star who is known to be a heartthrob among teenagers—but also encourages girls to pay attention to their studies and their health, so the post passes the approval of the adults as well as being engaging for girls.

Teachers are also important in the social dimensions of *Kishori Adda*. Teachers have opportunities to share the posts with adolescent girls in the classroom. The H2HD team shares links to relevant posts with teachers, or sends them downloaded versions of the same, to use during their engagement with students in the classroom. There are interactions here with the technological dimensions, discussed in more detail below, since teachers will display the *Kishori Adda* posts through the technical infrastructure accessible to them, or go on to share it in forums such as WhatsApp groups. Engaging with teachers, and other organizations working with young people, helps to widen its reach.

The handle ran its first social media campaign in October 2023 on the significance and relevance of equality for adolescent girls. The team reached out to their personal contacts who had many followers or were part of networks that could draw in more followers to engage with the campaign by sharing the posts. Other organizations—even if they worked in different languages—were also contacted for the same. Without any remuneration, these collaborations were a result of their faith in the work via the social media handle, their commitment to adolescent girl empowerment, and the larger good will that the team members and the organization as a whole had within these networks. Such interactions also highlight that collaborative online spaces need not always be driven by a capitalist mindset; shared ideals and passions also create the possibility of such collaborations.

6.3. Platform Dimensions

We have seen already that the algorithm is just one factor in a holistic view of social media for social change practices, but perhaps one of the most valuable aspects of the recipe metaphor was in brining attention to the advanced levels of platform literacy and agency required. Thinking about each post as a kind of food or meal itself reveals the program team's understandings that meals of different sizes and types play a role in feeding the platform's algorithm and their audiences' needs. The piranha quiz reel (recipe 2) is a good example of this, with its snacky quality, intended to grab attention, which, with associations with junk food, invites comparisons to "junk news" (Venturini 2019). Like junk news, there is an element in the piranha post of seeking to keep high levels of user impressions and keep engagement high, but unlike ads, clickbait, and fake or emotive articles driven by profit-making or trolling aims, the piranha reel was clarified as a 'healthy snack', offering interesting information as well as the pleasure of watching an attractively designed reel. Including a 'snacky' post can also be read as a resistance to neoliberal and patriarchal discourses, in that it recognizes that leisure, and leisure for women and girls, is as important. It is the combination of 'light' and 'intense' posts (like the 'comfort meal') that helps ensure the audience does not feel burdened by constantly being told about social issues and has a variety of content to engage with. Furthermore the regularity of posting is also part of the "visibility game" (Cotter 2019), since this is rewarded by the Instagram algorithm.

Some of the tactics are about "repairing" (Velkova and Kaun 2021) the algorithmic biases of Instagram. The team is aware that by virtue of the post being in the non-dominant language of Kannada, rather than in English or Hindi, and designed in the language and

aesthetic of a specific audience, it is less likely to be promoted by the Instagram algorithm. Yet, the Kannada language is vital for the primary audience. To navigate this setback from the algorithm, the main content is always in Kannada, but with English subtitles, captions, and hashtags. Furthermore, hashtags and captions are worded carefully to evade possible censorship, and trending hashtags and music are also deliberately chosen for purposes of amplification. In the landscape of Indian content on the internet, where there are hardly any pages in the Kannada language similar to Kishori Adda, the choice becomes political, representing a correction and resistance to the “‘brokenness’ of an algorithmic system” (Velkova and Kaun 2021, p. 536).

The “datafied feedback”, the provision of statistics to users on their impressions, likes, and comments (Treré and Bonini 2022), is, on the one hand, one of the mechanisms of “disciplining power” (Bucher 2017) of platforms to orient spaces towards patriarchal, neoliberal norms (Mahoney 2022; Semenzin 2022), and, on the other, one of the key ways all users learn about the algorithm and develop tactics and repertoires. The program team performs a weekly analysis of the social media handle to understand what kind of posts have worked best with the algorithm, and therefore, plan the content for the following weeks. Even without the weekly meeting, the immediate success of the Yaakavva Yaakavva post (recipe 1, comfort meal) was obvious. It was the first post to draw in over 2000 views in a few days. But rather than working because of conformity to neoliberal norms, as the recipe illustrates, this piece worked because of the power and cultural resonance of the content: featuring a traditional song with feminist lyrics, sung acapella by one of the adolescent girls engaged in the school program. Furthermore, the team is not only reliant on the platform-generated data. The program team also assesses the impact of the posts by directly interacting with adolescent girls during regular classroom engagements. Through this process, they discovered that while the algorithm prioritizes certain formats over others (e.g., reels over single static images or carousels), the adolescent girls preferred carousels and single static images. Part of playing the visibility game here, therefore, means that over a six-day schedule, the Kishori Adda team posts reels on two days to satisfy the algorithm, and on the other days, a single static image, a carousel, and a series of stories are uploaded.

Contrary to the risks of the “platformization of feminism” (Barbala 2022), developing compliance with and enabling a normalization of neoliberal and capitalist norms, Kishori Adda manages to remain a space of counter speech. It acknowledges the agency of adolescent girls by taking into account what interests them to present engaging content, valued over and above the algorithmic rewards. It creates spaces for expressions of emotion and vulnerability through posts like Yaakavva Yaakavva (recipe 1), featuring a young girl singing about discrimination, which might attract bullying or trolling in other mainstream spaces. The reel on trolling (recipe 3, the buffet) empowers the girls with the awareness of the forces operating under such a commonly experienced phenomenon, reassuring them that getting trolled is not their fault, and encouraging them to continue using the internet for their articulation and leisure, resisting the traditional patriarchal approach of telling them to stop using the internet. In this way, Kishori Adda carves out a space within commodified, datafied, neoliberal platforms that in fact empowers adolescent girls to engage in social media and other online spaces.

7. Conclusions

The datafication and commodification of public and private interactions under digital and communicative capitalism via social media platforms works to constrain their potential for social change. Just as scholars have discussed the emergence of platformized feminism, there is a risk of platformized social change communication from an uncritical, unreflective use of social media platforms, disciplined by the datafied feedback towards producing depoliticized, popular content to play the visibility game, contributing to the problems of corporatization of NGOs (Thomas 2018) and a default to uni-linear, often PR and branding modes, of social media use (Iranzo and Farné 2014; Comfort and Hester 2019; Montes 2024). Skepticism about the social change potential in the NGO space has contributed to a trend

in the CDSC literature to look at social movements for lessons on how to grapple with the opportunities to use social media for social change (Obregón and Tufte 2017; Tufte 2017; Thomas 2018; Farné et al. 2022), and few have engaged with questions of how this is or might be fostered in civil society NGOs. This paper has attempted to close the loop on that gap, engaging with the literature and theories emerging from activist and social movement studies and exploring ways of applying these to the NGO CDSC context. This is important, because, as cautioned by Enghel (2015) and Rodríguez et al. (2014), there has been far too little consideration of the challenges posed for CDSC under communicative and digital capitalism.

We argue that processes of reflection, resistance, and subversion are required in order to work against these logics if civil society NGOs are to successfully repurpose these spaces for social change. We developed a novel method cultivating this ‘hacker mindset’ through engaging in analytical reflection of social media posts. The metaphor-based creative method of ‘reverse engineering a recipe’ offers a mode of participatory, collaborative, and action-based analysis that is as rich as it is precise, and as playful as it is serious. It is a praxis-oriented framework for bringing awareness to the paradoxes and conundrums inherent in using communication spaces driven by neoliberal, patriarchal logics of mainstream, privatized social media platforms for social justice purposes. It enabled us to identify and refine tactics for subverting dominant cultural representations and build critical literacies; resisting and repairing algorithmic biases, including through skilled mixing of languages and types of posts; building offline solidarities, co-creation, and feedback processes; and evading both algorithmic and societal censorship to create spaces for counter speech on gender equality. The recipe metaphor presents a very different lens for critically reflecting on the organizations’ tactics and politics compared with the datafied metrics that the platform feeds to NGOs. Using the framework of the recipe that includes ingredients, method, and a meal description, the algorithm is located within the broader communicative ecology, highlighting the interconnectedness of the content, technological, and social dimensions.

This analysis is limited to reflecting on the practices of one organization, one which is already steeped in political practices of resisting digital capitalism. However, we suggest that this experience is also precisely why ITfC offers such a valuable perspective from which to reimagine uses of social media for social change. This kind of reflection can contribute to more meaningful and more critically aware CDSC practices using mainstream social media platforms across the field.

We conclude by extending the metaphor to convey its value and flexibility for other NGOs and their reflective practice. A recipe acknowledges the agency of the meal-maker, and the knowledge they have about the meal-eater and what will appeal to them. While a recipe comprises set ingredients and a methodical procedure, it is not fixed in stone. Depending on who cooks it, they might add or remove elements to suit their taste. Proportions may vary based on the occasion of the meal. These variations can also be made keeping in mind the person who will eat the food. Secondly, the metaphor of a meal highlights that not everything is instrumental in nature. A post may or may not meet nutritional needs, but it engages with the senses of smell, sight, and taste. It seeks to create an enjoyable experience for people eating the food. Third, it relates to social change practices, in that food is about community building and not bound by only transactional needs. For instance, one might share their favorite recipes with a friend so they may also partake in the experience of enjoying it, just as we have shared ours here.

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