

SRI LANKAN POLITICS AND SOCIAL MEDIA PARTICIPATION A CASE STUDY OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2019

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ABSTRACT

Social media has been a recent phenomenon which impact all parts of the society. The aim of this study is to investigate the key themes of the posts that dominated social media landscape and user generated interactions related to those posts during the Sri Lankan presidential election 2019. The paper has shown that social media has the ability to generate discussion and debate. The most popular FB posting was to promote particular presidential candidates, and it may possibly a guided influence. The most interacted themes were “Social fragmentation and reduce voter’s loyalty theme” and “economic justice”. When we analyse the user interactions we can see both guided and freely evolving interactions related to the Sri Lankan presidential election 2019.

The authors have shown that Facebook did have guided and freely evolving influences on the Sri Lankan presidential election of 2019. Findings of the case study concluded that there is a significant impact on politics campaign and level of user’s interaction of social media. Further, it was established that the misuse of social media has becoming a major challenge for future free and fair elections. Therefore, necessitates the need for a national social media policy that focuses on election as key stakeholders in the registered political parties.

KEYWORDS: Social media, Political Campaigns, Voters, awareness, candidates, democratic.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Internet has become a part of the life of many people around the world (Kritzing & Solms, 2010). “There is no argument whatsoever that the proliferation of devices and information are empowering. Technology is today far more democratically available than it was yesterday and less than it will be tomorrow” (Geer, 2015). The Internet evolvment in Sri Lanka is remarkable and most of the Internet related latest technologies were introduced to Sri Lanka sometime even before the other countries in the region (Abeysekara et al., 2012). Both the government and the corporate sectors of Sri Lanka have also incorporated the cyberspace into their operations. Thus, operations of the government and private sector institutions heavily rely on computers and the Internet. However, there are many threats and risks incorporated with the Internet (Riem, 2001). Furthermore, the Internet has led to criminal activities due to private information on it (De Joode, 2011). Hence, there is a risk of misusing and compromising personal data on the Internet (Tierney, 2018).

Social media is an outcome of the Internet platform on which individuals and groups can share their ideas, interests, and views with others. This media is more popular with the development of Internet technology and the attractiveness of web-based applications, enabling many-to-many communication

and online sharing. Aral et al., (2013) claim that social media is “fundamentally changing the way we communicate, collaborate, consume, and create”. There is no a common definition for social media. However, Kaplan and Haenlein, (2010) defined social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content”. Social media comprises the usage of online websites such as Facebook (FB), YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn and others which are used to reach their community base and to denote a variety of web-based tools that purportedly encourage communication. Similarly it enabled individuals to have access to variety of information sources facilitated by other consumers’ experiences and recommendations (Senecal & Nantel 2004). According to Hampton et al (2011) an average internet user has got over 669 social connections. Facebook statistics shows that they have more than 1.4 billion active users visited the social network on a daily basis and their annual revenue amounted to close to \$ 40.65 billion, the majority of which was generated via advertising in 2017. Experts estimated that over 2.95 billion people would have access social networks regularly in 2020.

Then again, social media influences traditional media and has become an alternative to traditional media (Piechota, 2011). Negussie & Ketema (2014) argued that FB is a media for freedom of dialogue and consent to people from different ethnicities, religions, and backgrounds to directly share information without any restrictions. Also, FB election campaign is recognized as a facilitative mode to access political information in several ways. Through FB group activists and ordinary citizens could voice their opposition to the government when denied democracy and suppress their views and voices (Hanson et al., 2010). For example, The USA presidential campaign in 2008 was the first to use the world of YouTube, My Space, FB, and political blogging Internet based for such purposes. By 2010, 22% of Internet users have been using social media network for political activity (Bekafigo et al., 2013). Further, many studies argued that social media could influence people by changing their perception, and attitudes and promote people to think differently. From a political party perspective, social media provides a cost-effective medium to reach-out to large number of users (voters), it provides a rich two way engagement with users (voters) and by its nature creates interaction. Social media also offers a business benefits for political parties, by using social media they could engage with many more users (voters) rather than traditional media, so it means their investment in social media could give greater returns (Warren, 2018).

Oppositely, online political campaigns distorted pluralistic debates and limited voters’ access to the truthful information and ability to make informed decisions compared with ground campaigns. Coordinated dissemination of false and demeaning information presented in digital platforms including traditional media (EU election observation mission in Sri Lanka Presidential election, 2019). Most of the political parties and their candidates use cross-platform electioneering tactics online, with official party pages adjoining third-party sites that frequently served to discredit the opposing candidates. Also these social media political campaigns have been used to social fragmentation and reduce voter’s loyalty towards democratic political parties and candidates. This trend is rising rapidly aiming at variety of targets. These campaigns target personal lifestyle values to engage with variety of cases such as human rights, racist violence, economic justice, environmental protection (Bennett, 2012).

Another key aspect of the use of social media by political parties is that it allows them to influence voters and the way that could vote, this is also known as information operations. Information operations also known as influence operations, includes the collection of tactical information about an adversary as well as the dissemination of propaganda.e.g. fake news in pursuit of a competitive advantage over an opponent. (Waltzman, 2017). In a Sri Lankan context, the influence of social media on Sri Lankan politics has brought new dangers. According to the Prime minister Ranil Wickramasinghe

“Sri Lanka continues to face ‘New dangers’ posed by hate speech, fake news” (Maldives Independent, 2019).

The aim of this study is to investigate “Does the Facebook influence the Sri Lanka Presidential election and the key themes of the posts that dominated social media landscape and user generated interactions related to those posts during the Sri Lankan presidential election 2019.” Also we aimed to examine what shape the influence takes, whether the influence is guided, or evolving freely related to the “Responsibility and Governance” of social media platforms”.

2. OVERVIEW OF SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka is an island located in the Indian Ocean and has a population of around 22 million. Sri Lanka is a country with a strong background of traditional and conservative way of life. The way of life is influenced by many factors: its history of civil war, its Buddhist heritage, the influence from South India, influences from the colonization of the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British. The society living in bigger cities is relatively more open-minded than the ones in the smaller cities. Communal cooperation and harmony rather than conflict and violence are the predominant features of Sri Lankan society.

According to the census 2012, the total population is 21.94 million in Sri Lanka and consists of majority 70.1% Sinhalese, 12,6% Tamils, 9.7% Muslims and remainder are other ethnic groups. The majority of the population is Buddhist at 67 % and the balance consists of Islamists, Hindus, and Christians. It is estimated that around 80% of the total population lives in the rural and semi-urban areas. Sinhala, Tamil, and English are the major languages with 92% of the population that can converse in Sinhala, while 81% can read and write that language. 15% of the population can converse in English while 19% can read and write it. Literacy is fundamentally important to the ability of the user to access information. In Sri Lanka Digital Literacy is 38.7% and IT, Literacy is 28.3%. Mobile phone subscriptions per 100 inhabitants are 103.16, a fixed telephone subscription per 100 inhabitants is 12.49 and broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants is 10.45. Household computer ownership is 23.5% while, email usage is at 11%, and Internet usage stands at 21.3%. There is a major difference in ICT readiness among the Rural, Urban and Estate sectors in Sri Lanka. Further, amongst the over 2.3 million users of social media, over 60% of them are male. It is projected that typically they spend around 34 minutes a day on social media (DCS Sri Lanka, 2017).

3. LEGAL ENVIRONMENT AND REGULATORY BODIES IN SRI LANKA

While the right to freedom of expression, speech, and publishing is guaranteed under Article 14(1) (a) of Sri Lanka’s constitution, it is subject to numerous restrictions related to the protection of national security, racial and religious harmony, public order and morality. The Human Right Commissioner of Sri Lanka stated “The Commission recognizes the critical necessity to protect freedom of expression and the right to information as guaranteed by the Constitution of Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka’s international human rights obligations”. Further, the Human Right Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) had reiterated the vital need to take legal action against those who were using social media to propagate communal hatred and incite sectarian violence, under applicable laws, in particular under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act No. 56 of 2007. Both Sri Lankan laws and English law have common landscapes with the digital media.

There are several legislations passed by the Sri Lanka parliament, namely, Computer Crimes Act (No. 24 of 2007), Payment Devices Frauds Act (No.30 of 2006), Information and Communication

Technology Act (No.27 of 2003) and Electronic Transactions Act (No. 19 of 2006). In addition, the technological framework for electronic signatures and authentication technologies and certificate authority was established in September 2013. The Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC) was established under the Sri Lanka Telecommunications (Amendment) Act, No. 27 of 1996. As the national regulatory agency for telecommunications, the TRC's mandate is to ensure and protect the interests of the public, provision of effective telecommunications and maintain effective competition between commercial telecommunications enterprises.

As a consequence, Sri Lanka Ministry of Mass Media and Information has declared national policy for media freedom and right to access information, to safeguard the right of all citizens to express their views via any media and to receive, provide and gather information required for the proper functioning of society; ensure that the media would not in any manner harm Sri Lanka's National identity and would prevent any person or community from being subject to contempt, insult, disgrace or hate by the media; to facilitate and ensure to all the Sri Lankan citizens the right of access to information.

4. CASE STUDY OF SRI LANKAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, 2019

Future of a country is decided by its voters. Sri Lankan nation has elected a new president in a landmark vote to overcome the challenges they posed due to sluggish economy, increasing political polarisation and security challenges such as Easter bomber attack which killed over 260 people and wounded hundreds more. This was the first Presidential election in Sri Lanka where sitting president, prime minister or opposition leader was not contesting for President. Gotabaya Rajapaksa won this election by defeating record of 35 candidates from across the political spectrum and elected as the 8th president of Sri Lanka.

Overall the presidential election was largely violence-free and a peaceful election which is well managed by the election department. However, the peaceful campaign on the ground contrasted by the few incidents related to the divisive rhetoric, hate speech and disinformation in traditional and social media (EU election observation mission in Sri Lanka Presidential election, 2019). According to the Statement by the European Union election observation mission (EU EOM) "2019 presidential election was largely free of violence and technically well-managed, but that unregulated campaign spending, abuse of state resources and media bias affected the level playing field".

The highest-profile candidates were Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Sajith Premadasa, who both attracted huge crowds at their ground rallies. Other than that they use traditional media, with a heavy presence in paid advertising in television and the print media such as newspapers. In addition they used cross-platform electioneering tactics online, with official party pages adjoining third-party sites that frequently served to discredit the opposing candidates. The volume of hostile commentary and interactions were higher on these third party sites compared to their official sites. However there was a significant gap between the two main candidates and other contestants in the election in terms of the resource allocation. The campaigns done by Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party of Anura Kumara Disanayaka and National People's party of Mahesh Senanayake were less prominent compared to other two main candidates. The remaining contestants were hardly visible on the traditional media or social media space. The bias coverage by public and private media and unavailability of campaign financial laws created this huge gap in the playing field. (EU election observation mission in Sri Lanka Presidential election, 2019).

Facebook was the main contributor which shaped political narratives and electoral agenda in the social media space. Below table 1 shows the statistics related to the top 4 candidates and their Facebook participation to the 2019 presidential election. According to the table 1 both Gotabaya Rajapaksa and

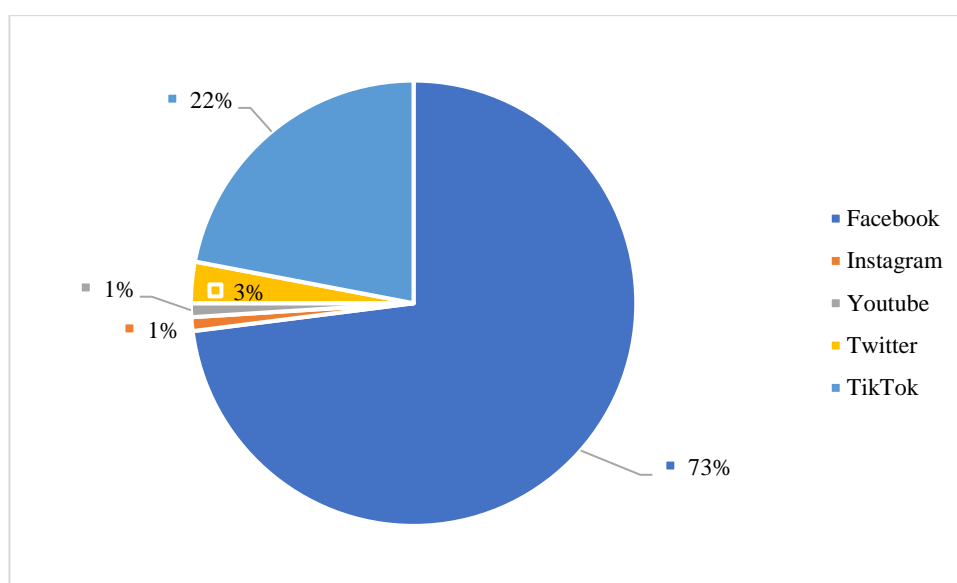
Sajith Premadasa have attracted highest number of followers and attractions to their posts as they did in their ground campaigns. According to the EU election observation mission (2019) The SLPP’s online campaign was the most spending online campaign compared to the rivals. (EU election observation mission in Sri Lanka Presidential election, 2019). However we can see that New Democratic Front party has got huge number of average followers (320567) while SLPP has got highest number of average interactions (441). Both of these parties (SLPP and NDF) social media participation seems higher compared to the rivals.

Table 1. Official Facebook pages and their interactions - 2019 presidential election.

| Candidate | Party | Official Facebook Page | Number of Post | Average Followers | Average Interactions |
|--------------------------|---|---|----------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Gotabhaya Rajapaksa | Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) | https://www.facebook.com/PodujanaParty | 464 | 52713 | 441 |
| Sajith Premadasa | New Democratic Front (NDF) | https://www.facebook.com/UNPofficialpage/ | 495 | 320567 | 391 |
| Anura Kumara Dissanayaka | National People's Power | https://www.facebook.com/nppsrilanka | 218 | 46872 | 267 |
| Mahesh Senanayake | National People's Party National Peoples Movement | https://www.facebook.com/nationalpeoplesmovement/ | 209 | 41233 | 208 |

Overall misuse of media created a massive impact on voters’ access to the factual information, which affected their ability to making fully informed decision. Coordinated dissemination of outright false and demeaning information presented in both traditional media and online platforms, however Facebook was leading this. Figure 1 shows that most of the social media misuse complains reported against the Facebook with 73%. Also most of the Facebook sites did not adherence to the campaign silence rules.

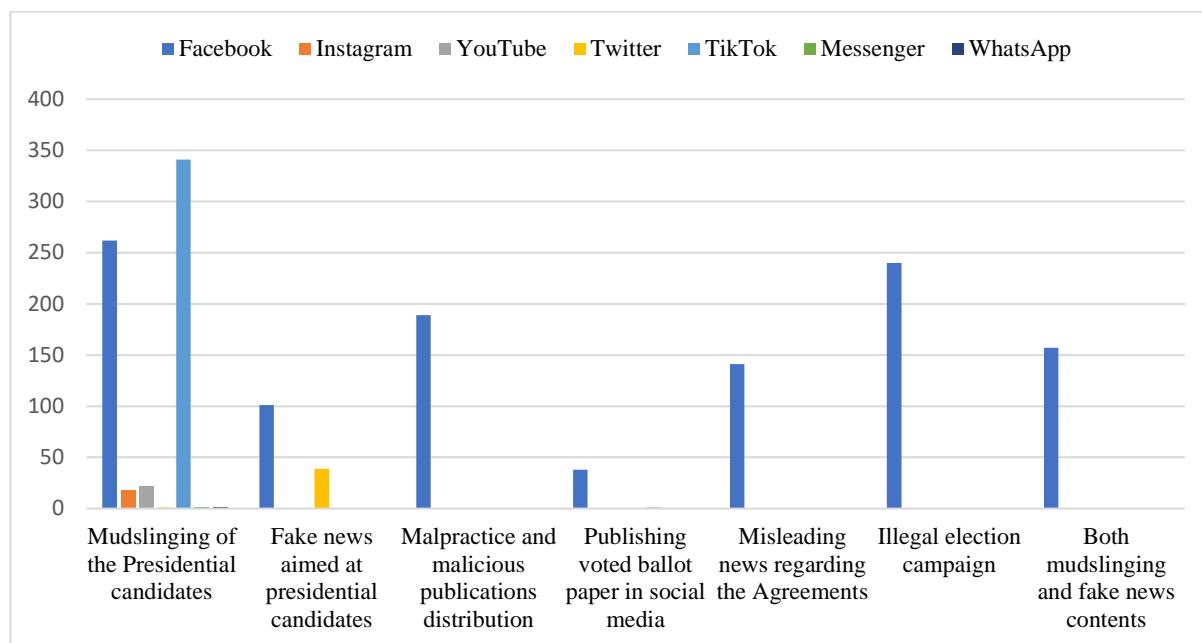
Figure 1. Misuse of social media by type - 2019 presidential election.



Source: ITSSL Social Media Monitoring Report (2019)

According to the social media monitoring report by information technology society (ITSSL) they have got 1593 complains related to the misuse of social media networks. In addition they have observed 240 incidents against campaign silence rules. Below figure 2 shows statistics related to the misuse of social media during the 2019 presidential election.

Figure 2. Misuse of social media for 2019 presidential election.



Source: ITSSL Social Media Monitoring Report (2019)

650 complains related to the mudslinging of the Presidential candidates and about 190 complains of malpractice and malicious publications received. Other than that, there have been 147 complaints of false news exchanges aimed at presidential candidates, and 142 complaints regarding the Millennium Challenge Agreement (MCC). There have also been complaints regarding eight fake social media accounts created using the names of presidential candidates. There are 157 complaints belonging to both mudslinging and fake news (ITSSL Social Media Monitoring Report, 2019).

However, in order to instigate the social media’s influence on the Sri Lankan Presidential election 2019 and to examine what shape the influence takes, we performed an independent study and this study collected data from Facebook using CrowdTangle related to the Sri Lankan presidential election 2019. The research question related to the study is “Does the Facebook influence the Sri Lanka Presidential election 2019 and to examine what shape the influence takes, whether the influence is guided, or evolving freely related to the “Responsibility and Governance” of social media platforms”. In order to answer the research questions we analysed key themes of the posts that dominated social media landscape and user generated interactions related to those posts during the Sri Lankan presidential election 2019.”

The study focussed on collecting data from the four most popular open FB political groups namely “Ape Rata”, “JVP Balakotuwa”, “Ekayayata kola patata”, “Sri AV TV Network”. These have been selected to perform the analysis and 175 posts had been selected using purposive sampling technique from October 20-27 in 2019, to analyse using the key themes by the researchers.

Table 2 presents the key themes of the posts and viewers' interactions during October 2019 related to the Sri Lanka presidential election.

Table 2. Type of posts used by the selected FB public groups and followers interactions related to the 2019 presidential election.

| Key Themes | Total Post (Frequency) | Percentage (%) | Number of reactions | Number of Shares | Number of Comments | Total Interactions (Count)* | Total Interactions (%)* | Average Followers per Theme** |
|---|------------------------|----------------|---------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Promotion of the candidates | 45 | 26% | 6061 | 4059 | 817 | 10937 | 19% | 324814 |
| Distribution of Fake News (false and demeaning information) | 16 | 9% | 1041 | 906 | 129 | 2076 | 4% | 144933 |
| Social fragmentation and reduce voter's loyalty | 29 | 17% | 5135 | 7409 | 747 | 13291 | 23% | 258282 |
| Social Awareness | 33 | 19% | 4506 | 3114 | 259 | 7879 | 13% | 426079 |
| Racist violence | 10 | 6% | 2983 | 2233 | 365 | 5581 | 9% | 362531 |
| Economic justice | 19 | 11% | 9246 | 3493 | 644 | 13383 | 23% | 659540 |
| Environmental protection | 6 | 3% | 339 | 306 | 40 | 685 | 1% | 215091 |
| Social Security and Human Rights | 17 | 10% | 3177 | 1376 | 427 | 4980 | 8% | 312524 |
| Total | 175 | 100% | 32488 | 22896 | 3428 | 58812 | 100% | |

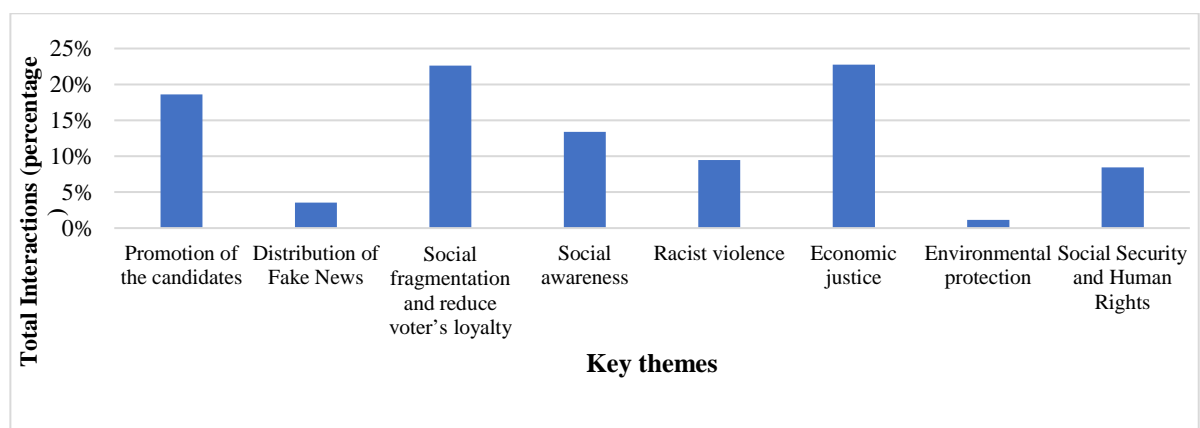
*Total Interactions: The sum of Reactions, Shares and Comments related to the each theme.

**Average Followers: The sum of Page Likes, Instagram followers, Twitter followers, or sub edit subscribers for all of the matching results.

Table 2 shows that the most of the posts shared related to the following themes: Promotion of the candidate (26%), Social fragmentation and reduce voter's loyalty (17%) and Social Awareness (19%) while Environmental protection (3%) theme is the least post shared theme.

Then we looked at the data to determine the social interactions related to the themes of the posts.

Figure 3. Distribution of social interactions by theme related to the 2019 presidential election.



*Total Interactions: The sum of Reactions, Shares and Comments related to the each theme.

Figure 3 explore the user generated interactions by theme. Total interactions were vary according to the each theme the majority of followers interacted to the ‘Social fragmentation & reduce voter’s loyalty’ and ‘Economic justice’ themes with each 23% interactions. Nevertheless Environmental protection theme has got least number of social interaction (1%) as shown.

The next stage was to analysis the distribution of Interaction by type related to the 2019 presidential election and the posts, this is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Distribution of viewer’s interactions by type related to the 2019 presidential election.

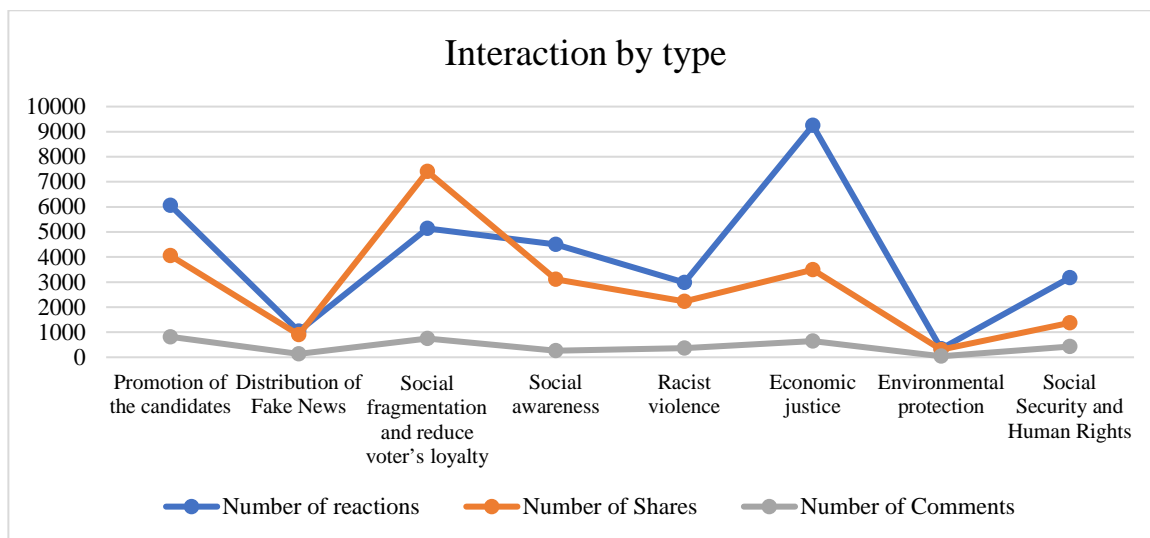


Figure 4 explore the viewer generated interactions by type. It’s interesting to see that the most of the viewers reacted to ‘Economic Justice’ theme while most shared posts related to the ‘Social fragmentation and reduce voter’s loyalty’ theme.

5. DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed what the major themes were in the Sri Lankan presidential election 2019. The analysis identified that the major themes ‘Promotion of the candidates’ (26%); ‘Distribution of Fake News’ (9%); ‘Social fragmentation and reduce voter’s loyalty’ (17%); ‘Social awareness’ (19%); ‘Racist violence’ (6%); ‘Economic justice’ (11%); ‘Environmental protection’ (3%) and ‘Social Security and Human Rights’ (10%). What was of interest was that number one theme was the ‘Promotion of particular candidates’ many of the posts were promoting the main candidates, Gotabaya Rajapaksha and Sajith Premadasa were popular. The highest-profile candidates were Gotabaya Rajapaksha and Sajith Premadasa and they had used a sophisticated and heavy social media campaigns (EU election observation mission; 2019) and that seems to influence social media posts related to Promotion of the candidates theme. Another interesting outcome was that ‘Distribution of Fake News’ that only reflected 9% of the themes in the posts, the authors had expected this figure to much higher.

Another important outcome of the analysis was the disclosure of social interactions related to the themes in the posts. Mostly interacted themes by the followers were Social fragmentation and reduce voter’s loyalty (23%) closely followed by Economic justice (23%). According to the EU election observation mission in Sri Lanka Presidential election (2019) most of the candidates used cross-platform electioneering tactics online, with official party pages adjoining third-party sites that

frequently served to discredit the rival. This may lead to influence posts and social interactions related to the “Social fragmentation and reduce voter’s loyalty theme mostly”. This may possibly a guided influence by third party sites operated by the political parties. Also Sri Lankan nation has struggled by the challenges they posed due to sluggish economy, increasing political polarisation and security challenges. Because of that National security and Economic Justice were a prominent themes in the election campaigns. From our analysis also we can confirm that the economic justice theme was a prominent theme in terms of the posts and social interactions.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper has shown that social media has the ability to generate discussion and debate, the authors showed that the most popular FB posting was to promote particular presidential candidates, and it may possibly a guided influence. The most interacted themes were “Social fragmentation and reduce voter’s loyalty theme” and “economic justice”. When we analyse the user interactions we can see both guided and freely evolving interactions related to the Sri Lankan presidential election 2019. Also issues such as Fake News were not a major issue. The authors have shown that Facebook did have guided and freely evolving influences on the Sri Lankan presidential election of 2019.

Findings of the case study concluded that there is a significant impact on politics campaign and level of user’s interaction of social media. Further, it was established that the misuse of social media has becoming a major challenge for future free and fair elections. Therefore, necessitates the need for a national social media policy that focuses on election as key stakeholders in the registered political parties.

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