

Analyzing the Effectiveness of Newsjacking Public Relation Characteristics and Their Impact on Social Media Engagement

(A Comparative Study of Sri Lankan Brand Campaigns)

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ABSTRACT

With the rising popularity of social media, a vast number of brands entered to advertise their products and services on these platforms. However, the monotonous nature of brands' marketing strategies has led to a decline in social media engagement between consumers and them. As a solution, the practice called newsjacking was identified as to gain attention of consumers and media exposure. Even though newsjacking is not a new practice on social media, there is little literature discussed about it. For this reason, the researcher's purpose was to analyze the effectiveness of Newsjacking Public Relation characteristics and their Impact on Social Media Engagement. The study utilized several newsjacking

campaigns to collect the data for the research. behaviour. All this data was demonstrated in a theoretical framework established for consumers' social media engagement using valid analysis techniques. According to the findings, the study found that newsjacking is formed of six elements: rapidness, relevant to the audience, humour, ability to decode the message, virality and creativity. Furthermore, the study observed that these characteristics could influence specific social media engagement activities of consumers. Therefore, these findings supported the theoretical gap that the fact of newsjacking public relations practice influences consumers' social media engagement.

Keywords - Engagement, Social media, Public Relations, Newsjacking

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1. INTRODUCTION

David Meerman Scott coined the term 'Newsjacking' in his book published in 2011, 'Newsjacking: How to Inject your Ideas into a Breaking News Story and generate tons of Media Coverage' (Scott, 2011), introducing a strategy for leveraging current events to garner significant media attention. The phenomenon stands for "The practice of taking advantage of current events or news stories in such a way as to promote or advertise one's product or brand" (Lexico, 2018). At the point when an organization is using newsjacking in their strategy, they are responding to what is going on the news on an instant premise and are ensuring they are the first ones to react (Scott, 2010)

In today's real-time social media environment, brands face a unique challenge. In the past, offline and TV commercial campaigns had the luxury of taking months to prepare, but with the advent of social media, campaigns must be created and executed within minutes to remain relevant (Kerns, 2014). Contemporary consumers are increasingly engaged in digital discussions (Jiang, Luo, & Kulemeka, 2016). These discussions, occurring both among themselves and with brands, require brands to provide compelling reasons for people to care about their messages and share them (Meire, Hewett, & Ballings, 2019). Successfully meeting this challenge can yield significant rewards, including increased followers and higher social media engagement—a crucial aspect for twenty-first-century brands (Kerns, 2014).

Newsjacking has become a pivotal element in many brands' social media strategies, allowing them to leverage current events and trends to draw attention to their products and services (Håkansson & Bengtsson, 2015). As Scott (2012) aptly puts it, "Sometimes, even a simple message can generate widespread coverage at the right time" (p. 27). Brands are eager to tap into the vast audience on social media and capture a share of that attention (Kerns, 2014).

A prime example of successful newsjacking occurred during the 2014 FIFA World Cup when Snickers capitalized on a famous incident involving soccer player Luis Suárez biting an Italian player. Snickers cleverly aligned their brand with the incident by using humor. They introduced the tagline, "You're not you when you're hungry" (Beck, 2014). This witty move resulted in immense engagement, with the post receiving 44,000 retweets and 20,000 favorites on Twitter and garnering more than 4,000 likes, 156 comments, and over 1,300 shares on Facebook (ibid)

A famous example of newsjacking practice is Oreo's successful tweet during the 2013 Super Bowl (Football game) in New Orleans. At the point when the stadium endured a 35-minute power interruption in the game, people turned to their social media (mainly Twitter) to talk about it (Scott, 2011). Oreo (a chocolate cookie brand) planned to take advantage of this. and within a short time, they had made an image of an Oreo cookie on a table in a dark room with the tagline "Power out? Don't worry about it; you can still dunk in the dark" (Håkansson & Bengtsson,

2015, p. 19-20). Since the audience had diverted their concentration to their smartphones, and since the power interruption was a trending news, Oreó's tweet became high-profile famous on Twitter. Within a few hours, this newsjacking campaign captured the attention of different news platforms, such as CNN, NBC.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research utilized a qualitative approach to perform a comparative analysis of newsjacking strategies within Sri Lankan brand campaigns. The data employed for this study was secondary in nature, emphasizing an anti-foundationalist ontological perspective. The chosen research strategy for this investigation was a case study approach, allowing for an in-depth exploration of newsjacking strategies deployed by Sri Lankan brands.

In analyzing web comments, the research looked at the respective newsjacking campaigns' comments that users have commented as texts. The objective of examining comments was to determine how users perceive newsjacking campaigns regarding their characteristics. Therefore, the purposive sampling method used for both techniques to select campaigns that are rich in information and emblematic aspects, thus giving way to more reliable intuition.

When considering the limitations of the methodology, the selected time for this study is 6 months. Based on that time period the scope was selected. Hence the data can be varied apart from the 6 months of the time period. Sample size would be 6 Newsjacking Public Relations Campaigns

3. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

3.1 Newsjacking Public Relations practice in Sri Lankan context

In the Sri Lankan context, few companies ran newsjacking campaigns in the last few years. Seylan Bank launched one of the most successful newsjacking campaigns for their credit cards. Their principal objective was to gain brand awareness for hotel offers on their credit cards during the holiday season. They produced a brief video using Dino Corraera and Gehan Blok, two well-known actors, about an ordinary circumstance that appeals to the target audience (Blok & Corera, 2018). The plot is based on newsjacking and timely relevant content. It was about traveling around the island using Seylan's credit card. The creative was about a typical office circumstance where Dino plays the role of a boss. Dino is out of ideas to please his wife and starts looking for assistance from his closest companion Gehan who takes on numerous roles to persuade Dino's wife on destinations (Blok & Corera, 2018). The entire story rotates around various destinations in Sri Lanka and news incidents related to that particular destination to showcase the way that Seylan Credit Cards provide an offer to travel anywhere on the island (Blok & Corera, 2018). Newsjacking incidents used to relate to sports and politics (Blok & Corera, 2018).

Following statements made by Blok and Corera (2018) are directly related to newsjacking, At one particular time, Dino's wife mentioned, "No flights coming to Hambantota airport." Another point that Dino said, "There is no more Wilpattu

forest because there are no trees.” Finally, Gehan brought up the quote “Off Season” by famous South African cricketer, AB de Villiers, because AB de Villiers made fun of Sri Lankan cricket players for losing matches consecutively. What he meant by "Off Season" was that playing cricket with Sri Lanka is less competitive and therefore, easy to win. A short time after AB de Villiers made that comment, the South African cricket team visited Sri Lanka for a test match series, and they lost the series against them. Many Sri Lankans made fun of AB de Villiers on social media for what he said, and the "Off Season" quote became a boomerang for him (Sri Lanka vs. South Africa: Sri Lankan fans troll AB de Villiers for his comments about the tour, 2018). Then Gehan and Blok used this quote because it became viral on social media.

The purpose of using the above example is to look at the impact on social media engagement by newsjacking. With regards to the above example, according to Blok & Corera (2018), On Facebook, their video has gone beyond viral because of the inventiveness of the idea (however, they have used a boost of USD 100 as well). They have reached over 650,000 views organically (genuine reach without paying money). The video reached overwhelmingly Western provinces, aged 25-34 audience (Blok & Corera, 2018). The official Website of Blok and Dino has published the social media engagement analytics of the newsjacking campaign they have done.

Overall, there are 27,322 responses (likes and other reactions), 7,119 shares, and also 3,104 comments for the original video.

Contrasting to ordinary posts, the quality of the comments was also positive. When it comes to YouTube, (where they did not boost their video), all reach, impressions, and views are recorded organically (genuine responses without paying money) (Blok & Corera, 2018). There were 128,600 views for the video and over 1 million impressions. Another scenario is, that a reputed Facebook page named “Api Sri” shared this video on their page, and it gained over 1 million views and over 20,000 shares. Apart from social media engagement analytics, Seylan Bank confirmed their platinum card acquisition grew by 218%, and their YOY sales growth increased by 122%. (Blok & Corera, 2018). Eventually, this video became viral content on social media in sequence to achieve higher social media engagement. Therefore, the Seylan Bank credit cards campaign indicates how brands can leverage newsjacking practice to receive higher social media engagement from people.

Digital Public Relations provided an invaluable opportunity for brands by letting them have conversations with consumers. Newsjacking strengthened this conversation by providing relevant content to brands in an innovative way. Brand engagement consists of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral factors. Followed by Social media engagement, which evolved from brand engagement in digital media. Previous literature indicated that behavioral factors of brand engagement have a higher similarity in social media engagement activities. In a practical scenario, newsjacking appears to be a useful tool in generating social media engagement. The above literature review discussed social

media marketing to newsjacking and brand engagement to outcomes of newsjacking. Even though newsjacking is not a new practice in social media marketing; there was not much literature on this topic. Existing literature provided only the theoretical aspect of newsjacking. Since literature does not appear to have explored this relationship thoroughly, it is an interesting area to research.

3.2 Identifying Newsjacking and Other Social Media Characteristics

As explained by Maon et al. (2018), the study identified four characteristics of newsjacking. Rapidness or executing the campaign within the right-time frame helps the brand to get the attention of the people. Relevance in newsjacking practice emphasizes the importance of participating in consumers' conversations without using conventional marketing messages. Humour plays the role of producing light-hearted content to gain favourable attitudes toward the brand. Finally, how consumers comprehended the newsjacking campaign depends on the ability to decode the story. Each of these characteristics imply they are vital in making the newsjacking campaign more engaging.

Moreover, the study identified two characteristics, which were not specifically discussed under the theoretical sphere of newsjacking but in social media campaigns. Namely, virality and creativity. Virality can be defined as the possibility of rapid circulation of a piece of content on social media. To be viral, it should represent a status, prompt users' mind, combine with an emotion, associate with consumer norms, produce a value, and include a story

(Berger, 2016). Creativity denoted as a dynamic human skill to produce something novel in the context. Novelty is caused from unexpectedness, surprise, unusualness, uniqueness, and unpredictability (San et al., 2020) Content materials, which consist of creativity, can rise among other conventional materials. In the following section, the study has analyzed five Sri Lankan newsjacking campaigns executed on social media to identify newsjacking characteristics.

3.3 Case Studies

3.3.1 Maliban Biscuits' Oxygen Campaign

News item

A proposal to develop a playground in the Kadolkele mangrove of the Negombo lagoon has been reversed after the solid stand taken by the Gampaha District Forest Officer. A video containing the footage of the conversation where a few residents of the area are verbally arguing with the forest official asking her permission for the development of the playground has turned into a viral topic on social media ("Forest officer sticks to guns, refuses to break the law," 2020). In the video footage, one resident got hostile with the forest officer and said, "There is no need of Oxygen" (Dailymirror, 2020).

Maliban Campaign

After releasing video footage to the internet, the above incident gradually became a viral video on social media. Maliban capitalized this incident and published a static post by saying, "When you are out of Maliban biscuits for teatime, it is like having no oxygen to breathe."

Rapidness - The incident happened on the 10th of February 2020 (Dailymirror, 2020). News reporters reported it on the 12th of February. The media team of the Maliban Biscuits Company observed this scenario, realized it was becoming a trending topic, kept pace with the journalists and published the campaign on the same day (12th of February). Thus, the response was rapid.

Relevant to the audience - In relation to the mangrove incident, it was the time that the audience gained to know and have a conversation about it. In other words, this incident is becoming a trending topic in social media. Maliban Biscuits did not push the news that the audience already knew, but they added a meaningful message which was, “When you are out of Maliban biscuits for tea time, it is like having no oxygen to breathe.” Maliban Biscuits implied their biscuits are equally important as oxygen in the teatime. They have not repeated what the news said but added an innovative message to earn users’ attention.

Humour - It should be noted that the image used by the Maliban company did not generate any sense of humor. However, the person who made the reckless comment by devaluing the importance of oxygen was highly mocked on social media. Therefore, the Maliban company did not need to add humour in the campaign because the incident itself was treated sarcastically by the audience.

Ability to decode news story - When decoding the news story, Oxygen was the cue that the audience kept in their mind. It is because the individual said, “There is no need of Oxygen”. Therefore, Maliban Biscuits also included a similar phrase

which is “It is like having no oxygen”. This phrase provided the opportunity for the audience to understand the underlying incident and engage with the campaign.

Virality - “When you are out of Maliban biscuits for teatime, it is like having no oxygen to breathe.” This sentence in the campaign emphasizes not having Maliban Biscuits at teatime is similar to the lack of oxygen to breathe. Given the importance of oxygen, here it shows the ‘trigger’ component of virality because Maliban Biscuits used this word to show the current relation of their biscuit at the teatime.

Creativity - It should be noted that creativity does not appear within the Maliban Biscuits’ Oxygen campaign. It derived from showing the advertisement at an unexpected time to the audience. Thus, the unexpectedness produced creativity.

3.3.2 Clogard Fresh Blast Gel with Cinnamon and Propolis

News item & the campaign

In October 2019, Clogard Fresh Blast Gel introduced their new tooth gel to the market. It was named as Clogard Fresh Blast Gel with Cinnamon and Propolis. The main ingredients in this tooth gel are Cinnamon and Propolis. The time that Clogard Fresh Blast Gel launched the product into the market, the presidential election in Sri Lanka was a highly popular topic among the local audience. Clogard Fresh Blast Gel identified this hype and launched a newsjacking campaign using two hypothetical presidential candidates with the names of the main ingredients. “Propolisia Danthanarayana” represents the Propolis ingredient and Propolis is referred

to as “Beeswax” in English. “Hasitha Kurunduwatte” represents the Cinnamon ingredient and Kurundu is referred to as “Cinnamon” in English. Similar to the other presidential candidates, Propolisia Danthanarayana and Hasitha Kurunduwatte started their campaigns through their respective social media pages. They used political advertising methods such as manifestos, voice cuts, press releases and published them on their respective social media pages. Throughout the campaign, Propolisia and Hasitha adopted significant political incidents which happened in the presidential election. A day before the election date, Propolisia and Hasitha held a live stream talk-show on social media. They revealed their connection with Clogard Fresh Blast Gel Cinnamon and Propolis tooth gel and informed the users that they were not the candidates for the presidential election but the ingredients of the tooth gel.

Rapidness – As stated above, Clogard Fresh Blast Gel with Cinnamon and Propolis launched a newsjacking campaign during the presidential elections with Propolisia Danthanarayana and Hasitha Kurunduwatte (Appendix 3.2.1). They adopted significant political incidents that happened in presidential elections into their campaigns. For instance, in a meeting, one presidential candidate said, “I promise that I will go to the homes at night to check on peoples’ wellbeing.” (Gunasekara, 2019). He said this on the 31st of October. Since it was an unusual election promise, this quote became immensely popular within the audience on social media. Hasitha Kurunduwatte saw this opportunity and came up with a newsjacking campaign on the 4th of November which highlighted,

“Morning and Night, Hasitha is close to you.”. When the post was published, the audience knew it was related to the quote made by a presidential candidate. Publishing this post while the incident is trending on social media has increased the audience’s attentiveness to the post.

Relevance to the audience - Clogard Fresh Blast Gel with Cinnamon and Propolis campaign was initiated fifteen days before the presidential election. Since it is the time that the entire country is interested in politics, if the product was introduced to the market with a conventional advertisement campaign on television or as an outdoor promotion, the audience would not retain the advertisement in their mind because their interest is on another event. People expect mudslinging, criticism of speeches, crossovers between parties, false promises in political campaigns. For instance, Propolisia Danthanarayana published a voice record clip on her social media page which was about how Hasitha Kurunduwatte paid his people to insult her status. The popularity of the post suggests it has gained the attraction of the audience because people expect such events during election season. The Clogard Fresh Blast Gel with Cinnamon and Propolis campaign has gained higher popularity on social media as the posts are based on events that occurred in the presidential election.

Humour - With reference to the Clogard Fresh Blast Gel campaign, it has utilized humour in most content materials. In a video published by Hasitha Kurunduwatte, he accidentally pressed the voice search without having any knowledge about it and said, “If Propolisia wins, I will have to

leave for Australia by boat.” and the voice replied to him, “You cannot come to Australia by boat. They will send you back.” . The sarcastic response from the voice-search assistant and the awkward moment that Hasitha is facing there, highlights the sense of humour in the video.

Ability to decode the news story - On one occasion, Propolisia Danthanarayana has published a post (Appendix 3.2.4) on her social media page saying, “My political campaign is eco-friendly. So, I want your donations to carry out my campaign.”. In the presidential election, the word donation was a highly discussed subject among the people. That was due to an incident where one presidential candidate withdrew his nomination after receiving public donations for his election campaign (Himal Southasian, 2019). The people accused the candidate of collecting donations for his election campaign and then hiding without handing over nominations. Then, Propolisia Danthanarayana has used the word donation in this post, which has given the opportunity to the audience to understand the story behind it.

Virality - The entire Clogard Fresh Blast Gel with Cinnamon and Propolis campaign was based on the Sri Lankan presidential election. Using Propolisia Danthanarayana and Hasitha Kurunduwatte, the campaign exhibited a variety of stories revolving around the election. Moreover, most of the posts published in the campaign provided enjoyment to users. Thus, the campaign became viral on social media.

Creativity - Throughout the Clogard Fresh Blast Gel with Cinnamon and Propolis campaign, both candidates published static

posts, videos, live discussions, virtual polls to promote themselves. For instance, as the final promotional promotion, both candidates had to attend a live debate premiered on Facebook. Before the live debate, both candidates boasted they would defeat the other candidate. However, at the end of the debate, both candidates came to an agreement, settled with each other, and revealed their true identities. Hence, such activities demonstrate how the campaign attempted to create something novel in the context.

3.3.3 LAUGFS Types of Sri Lankans at the Supermarkets

News item

In October/November 2018, the removal of the Prime Minister by the Sri Lankan president and a new prime minister’s appointment was a highly controversial incident that happened in Sri Lankan Parliament. When the government party members brought a no-confidence motion against the new Prime Minister to remove him from the position, opposition members surrounded the Speaker’s seat and obstructed the Speaker from conducting the voting. Initially, there were verbal attacks between the ruling party and opposition, but later, opposition members attacked the ruling party with chili powder and furniture (Safi, 2018). This incident has gained the attention of both local and international media as the chili powder chaos in Sri Lankan Parliament.

Campaign

LAUGFS Supermarkets did a campaign to enhance the brand awareness of newlook LAUGFS Supermarkets amongst modern

trade shoppers (Appendix 3.3). It was a video featured by Blok and Dino (two YouTube artists) and premiered in December 2018 on social media. The video was titled “Types of Sri Lankan at the supermarket.” The main purpose behind the video was to show different behaviour patterns of consumers at supermarkets. To bring excitement, the video has utilized several incidents that became highly popular in society. One of them is the chili powder chaos that happened in the Sri Lankan Parliament. The video represents the incident as follows and it defines this scene as ‘drive-through’ customers. A person who can be said to be working in a security unit is walking towards a jeep. As he approaches the car, another person in a white suit inside the jeep asks if he has bought all the items. Then he shows the goods he brought to the person inside the jeep. Suddenly the person inside the jeep becomes angry and asks, “Where is the chili powder?” At the same time, the security person hands over the chili powder packet to the person inside the jeep. Then he shouts, “Rana, mix this chili powder in water, and let’s go to Parliament... Cheers!”

Rapidness - The incident occurred in Parliament on November 16, 2018. Due to the incident’s intensity, it was published on the online news websites on the same day (Safi, 2018). However, the LAUGFS campaign was released in December 2018. That is, several weeks after it happened. Thus, it does not have the rapidness element.

Relevance to the audience - Although the LAUGFS newsjacking campaign was released several weeks after the incident in

Parliament, Blok and Dino used the event because it was becoming popular among the community. Moreover, using the drive through customer segment, they have expressed the behavior of an audience that visits the supermarket. Hence, rather than communicating a mere marketing message utilizing the chili powder incident, employing it for something relevant to the audience could increase the engagement in the campaign.

Humour - As mentioned earlier, this incident became highly discussed news in local and international media. This is because such incidents are rare in a supreme institution like Parliament. In the video, Blok and Dino had sarcastically addressed the Parliamentarians involved in the incident through the LAUGFS campaign. By the phrase, they used, “Mix this chili powder into water, and let’s go to Parliament...” It shows that the Parliamentarians are going to the Parliament to clash with fellow Parliamentarians. Similarly, the dialogues and the performances of both artists added more humour to the video.

Ability to decode the story - The first few seconds of the video clip does not show any cues related to the event. However, when it shows the person dressed in white, viewers can guess him as a public representative. Later, this clip relates to the Parliamentary situation when the person who looks like a public representative says, “Rana, mix this chili powder into water, and let’s go to Parliament... Cheers!” In this dialogue, by the terms ‘chili powder’ and ‘Parliament,’ the viewer can assume that he is implying the incident. Moreover, ‘Cheers!’ confirms

that the person dressed in white is a Parliamentarian.

Virality - In the campaign, LAUGFS exhibited various behaviour patterns of consumers at the supermarkets. This scene of security personnel and the Parliamentarian referenced drive-through customers who purchase products without leaving their vehicles. The discussion between the security personnel and the Parliamentarian shows that they are going to create a disturbance in Parliament using the chili powder. It also indicated how LAUGFS used an unusual story to demonstrate a particular customer behaviour using the chili powder incident at the Parliament. Furthermore, using drive-through customers type, LAUGFS referenced it to upper social class consumers in the newsjacking scene. Hence, it shows the story and social currency elements in virality.

Creativity - The campaign was launched a few weeks after the initial incident. However, at that time, the audience was already aware of it. Hence, creativity was not visible through the campaign.

3.3.4 Seylan Bank's Wet Hair Wet Pitch Campaign

News item

A cricket match between India and Sri Lanka was called off due to the rain. The game could have been recommended because the rain stopped after a while. However, ground staff have failed to dry the pitch on time and due to that, the game was called off. They tried various techniques such as rollers, vacuum cleaners to dry the dampened pitch. As those efforts

were unsuccessful and next, they began using hairdryers and steam irons to dry the pitch. Since it was showing the desperate efforts of ground staff, the incident went viral in social media, and cricket supporters in both countries have started to make fun of the Indian Cricket Board and ground staff of the stadium for their failure (Rudra, 2020).

Campaign

Following the publicity of the incident on social media, Seylan Bank has partnered with Abans Company to publish a newsjacking campaign about the incident. They released a static post saying, "Wet Hair? Wet Pitch? Get all in one multi-purpose electronics with up to 20% savings at Abans only with your Seylan Card!" The campaign's purpose was to disseminate awareness on the offer of Seylan Bank's credit when purchasing Abans electrical appliances.

Rapidness - The incident happened on the 5th of January 2020 (Rudra, 2020). Seylan Bank launched its campaign on the very next day, which was on the 6th of January. They saw it was becoming a trending topic on social media and quickly captured the opportunity.

Relevance to the audience - As stated above, Indian ground staff went to the extent to use electric devices such as hairdryers and steam irons to drain the pitch. What Seylan Bank did is, they came up with a creative execution for credit cards about an offer for electric items using this incident. Since the original incident has a connection with electric devices, Seylan Bank has created a relevant connection between the incident and their offer.

Therefore, the study observed a twofold connection in the newsjacking campaign. That is, a creative execution related to electronic devices and a discount offer for credit cardholders combining the respective incident.

Humour - It should be noted that the campaign itself does not generate a sense of humour. However, Rudra (2020) asserted, some users posted images on social media about how the ground staff drying the pitch using hair dryers and seeing this, many people sarcastically condemned these actions of the Indian Cricket Board. That was the main reason why this incident was humorous to the audience.

Ability to decode the story – In their creative execution, Seylan Bank used the image of a cricket stadium, a leather bowl, and a hairdryer. Moreover, the tagline, “Wet Hair? Wet Pitch?” stimulates the audience to decipher the underlying event.

Virality - Seylan Bank’s Wet Hair Wet Pitch campaign launched to advertise their credit card discount for electronics. In terms of virality, it indicates a practical value for consumers who possess credit cards because they can purchase electronics at a discount. Apart from that, using the wording “Wet Hair”, the advertisement indicated that it is the ideal time to purchase electronics for consumers. Next instance the study identified that, using the word “Wet Pitch”, Seylan Bank sarcastically suggested India purchase hair dryers to dry their pitch as well. In the first instance, Seylan Bank had utilized triggers to relate their discount to consumers and in the following instance, they had provided enjoyment to users from the incident.

Creativity - The study observed that Seylan Bank already had published a credit card promotion for electronic items (Appendix 3.4.2). However, Seylan Bank’s Wet Hair Wet Pitch campaign launched precisely within 24 hours after the initial incident happened. It shows that the Seylan Bank used this unpredicted incident to promote their credit promotion again. As a result, the unpredictable nature of the incident caused the campaign’s creativity.

3.3.5 The Economic Patient Campaign by Block and Dino

News item

A series of bombs ripped through churches and hotels in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, killing at least 290 people and injuring hundreds. After that the tax concession given by the Podujana Peramuna government, when they came to power in 2019, the taxes such as VAT, Personal Income and Corporate Taxes were amended which led the tax revenue to be reduced by 3.46% of the GDP. According to the Varite Research records, Tax Policy changes implemented in January 2022 reduced the government revenue by over 25% and contracted the tax base by over 33%. As the solution to this debt crisis Money Printing, a concept based on the modern monetary theory was introduced by the government. That can be identified as the main reason as to why Sri Lanka’s economy is suffering at the present. Aftermath of this solution is the debt crisis of the country only got worse and then in 2020 Covid-19 virus came into play. With this pandemic situation, the crisis has gotten more serious. The Economic Specialists in the country were suggesting different kinds of strategies to

get this worst situation under control but the government did not allow them to implement those strategies. After that as per the Verite Research records, Sri Lanka seems to be banking too much on inflows from tourism. In 2019, foreign exchange spent per tourist per day was estimated as USD 181.23. But regional peers expect much less: India USD 130.33, Indonesia USD 129.20, and Vietnam USD 132.60. The Credit Rating of the country is like the heart rate and if the rating goes down, we must face crucial problems. The main reason behind this is investors who deal with Sri Lanka will not come to the country if the Credit Rating goes down because nobody is likely to do business with Countries which are at the brink of death.

According to the Verite Research records, Sri Lanka's Fitch Credit Rating has been downgraded 4 times from the beginning of 2022 until mid-April 2022. As of now, the current rating is at C. The other countries who are suffering from the same matter have taken the Debt restructuring as the solution by moving into the International Monetary Fund. Without a proper plan on the economy, the government spent dollars to accomplish their personal desires and finally the reserves depleted. Since the country does not have dollars to run the economy, to save reserves, they even restricted the imports of essential items. According to the Varite Research records Sri Lanka's foreign reserves reduced from over 4 months to less than one month of imports from 2019 to 2021. But all other South Asian countries increased their reserves. Furthermore, Swaps and credit lines taken by the government from other countries, but doing it long-term is not

feasible. As per the Verite Research records, Sri Lanka's usable foreign reserves fell to USD 369 Million in March 2022 from USD 7,622 million in March 2019. As per no lends without condition, countries such as India, China asked for strategic assets of our country. Taking tough economic measures to save the country from going bankrupt due to debt, the government took few strategies. On 7th April 2022, Dr.P.Nandalal Weerasinghe, a career central banker with extensive experience in Monetary and Exchange Rate Policy, assumed duties as the 17th Governor of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka. Same day, Dr.Indrajit Coomaraswamy, Prof.Shanta Devarajan, and Dr.Sharmini Coorey, who are eminent economists and fiscal experts, were appointed to advise the government on multilateral engagement and debt sustainability. On 8th April 2022, the Monetary Board of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka decided to increase the Standing Deposit Facility Rate (SDFR) and the Standing Lending Facility Rate (SLFR) of the Central Bank by 700 basis points to 13.50 per cent and 14.50 per cent respectively. On 12th April 2022, Sri Lanka announced a temporary suspension of debt payments in preparation for a comprehensive debt restructuring program with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Campaign

The hidden agendas behind why China & India are investing billions of dollars and issuing lends for the support of Sri Lanka to overcome this debt crisis incident gradually became a viral story on social media. Block and Dino (two YouTube artists) capitalized

this incident and has partnered with Varite Research, Strategic Analysis for Asia and Public finance.lk by Varite Research did a campaign to enhance the public awareness of the Debt Crisis in Sri Lanka. It was a video featured by Blok and Dino (two YouTube artists) and premiered in December 2022 on social media. The video was titled "The Patient". The main purpose behind the video was to show in-depth of the debt crisis, how Sri Lanka's economy has collapsed due to irrational decisions by responsible parties and the things we should do to get rid of this crucial juncture. To bring excitement, the video has utilized several incidents that became highly popular in society.

Rapidness - The sequence of events leading to the debt crisis in Sri Lanka commenced in mid-2019, with a culmination in social media discussions commencing in early April 2022. Subsequently, the "Economic Patient" campaign was launched on April 18, 2022. Despite a time lag of several weeks, the campaign coincided with ongoing discussions related to the debt crisis on social media, signifying an element of rapid response.

Relevance to the audience - The economic landscape in Sri Lanka had reached a critical juncture marked by high inflation, abrupt price surges for essential commodities, and fuel shortages. Given the nation's heightened interest in the debt crisis and concerns about political corruption, strategic content aligned with the prevailing circumstances effectively captured the audience's attention and engagement. Thus, the campaign exhibited a high level of relevance to the audience.

Humor - Humor was strategically employed throughout the campaign to maintain audience engagement and convey nuanced messages related to the subject matter. For instance, in the introductory segment of the video, a satirical exchange between "Appachchi" (former President Mahinda Rajapaksha) and the "mother of the economic patient" (the public) revolved around discussions of loans and debt payments. The dialogue humorously alluded to the accumulation of debt, symbolized as "credit cards" denoting swaps and credit lines obtained from foreign countries, thereby emphasizing the worsening debt crisis. Additionally, the video featured a comical portrayal of "Appachchi" and the "Dr. Kabba" government organizing a "Thovil" (a traditional Sri Lankan ritual) to heal the economic patient. This scene underscored the depletion of national reserves due to government expenditure on non-essential endeavors. As Sri Lanka faced a shortage of foreign currency reserves, the government resorted to restricting imports of vital goods. The "Thovil" scene humorously represented the current economic scenario, depicting it as a fruitless attempt to cure the economic patient. Lastly, the video concluded with two individuals, symbolizing India and China, entering the hospital to inquire about acquiring the economic patient's organs in exchange for settling hospital bills. These "organs" symbolized strategic assets of the country, such as lands, airports, and ports, humorously highlighting the consequences of an inability to meet debt obligations and the subsequent impact on the nation.

Ability to decode the news story - The campaign successfully employed various instances, such as the portrayal of India and China seeking country assets if hospital bills could not be paid (an analogy for these nations seeking repayment of debt), the depiction of the "Thovil" scene (representative of government actions diverting focus from the economic crisis), and the "credit cards" discussion between "Appachchi" and the "mother of the economic patient" (symbolizing debt obtained from foreign countries). These elements served as effective tools for the audience to comprehend the underlying narrative.

Virality - The campaign capitalized on the virality of the debt crisis, which had become a prominent and contentious topic in both social media and society at large. The campaign's title, "The Economic Patient," humorously encapsulated the current state of the Sri Lankan economy, fostering viral appeal. Phrases like "Which credit card? How many credit cards did you get now?" underscored the concept of swaps and credit lines acquired from foreign governments, accentuating the worsening debt crisis. Such elements acted as "triggers" for virality, strategically aligning the campaign with the ongoing discourse. Furthermore, terms such as "Appachchi" and "Thovil" imbued different meanings, further enhancing their viral potential across social media platforms.

Creativity - Despite the campaign's launch occurring shortly after the peak of the incident, the creative elements in the campaign were evident through the clever use of language and imaginative scenes.

These creative elements effectively conveyed the campaign's message, incorporating a sense of humor and engaging factors.

In conclusion, the "Economic Patient" campaign ingeniously combined rapid responsiveness, relevance to the audience, humor, effective storytelling, virality, and creativity to address the pressing issue of the debt crisis in Sri Lanka. Through its strategic deployment of humor and symbolism, the campaign succeeded in engaging the audience while effectively conveying the complexities of the economic crisis and its consequences.

3.4 Web Comment Analysis

Under the first objective of the study, the analysis relating to identifying specific newsjacking characteristics in Sri Lankan newsjacking campaigns were discussed. The findings demonstrated that almost all the campaigns consisted of newsjacking characteristics and other social media characteristics. Most campaigns utilized a sense of humour and creativity in them. On one occasion, the study noted that creativity, which is the other social media characteristic, is absent when the rapidness, the newsjacking characteristic, was not seen in the campaign. In web comments analysis, the findings revealed that the majority of the social media users also identified the humour and creativity characteristics in newsjacking campaigns. It was found that even though the campaign does not demonstrate humour, users still perceive it as humour because the utilized incident was humorous. Even though users did not add remarks related to virality characteristics, they mentioned their peers

in the comment section to make the campaign virality. In addition to that, most users appreciated the brand's creativity. The findings relating to how these characteristics influence consumers' social media engagement levels is presented in the following chapter in accordance with the second objective of the study.

4. CONCLUSION

This research aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Newsjacking Characteristics in Sri Lankan Newsjacking PR Campaigns through content analysis of case studies. The primary objective was to identify key characteristics inherent in these campaigns, shedding light on their strategies and impact.

Rapidness, one of the fundamental aspects of successful newsjacking, as emphasized by Dumitriu and Bahna (as cited in Offermans, 2018), is the swift response to an event. Our findings align with this principle, revealing that brands in Sri Lanka timed their newsjacking campaigns to coincide with the events becoming trending topics on social media. This rapid response was not only observed but also appreciated by users who recognized the timely nature of these campaigns. This underscores the importance of immediacy in newsjacking, where brands need to seize the moment when an event captures public attention.

Relevant to the audience, in accordance with Kerns' (2014) assertion that content should resonate with the audience, our content analysis revealed that Sri Lankan brands placed a strong emphasis on crafting messages that were meaningful to their

target audience. Instead of merely capitalizing on the incident itself, these brands sought to add value to user conversations surrounding the event. Users, in turn, expressed appreciation for brands that contributed positively to the discourse. This aligns with the findings of Micu and Thorson (2008), who highlighted the significance of diversifying conversations and its positive impact on brand attitudes.

Humor emerged as a prevalent characteristic in Sri Lankan newsjacking campaigns, often intertwined with political incidents. This finding is in line with Baum's research (as cited in Heiss and Matthes, 2019), which suggests that political humor can significantly enhance user engagement on social media. It's worth noting that while some campaigns directly infused humor into their messaging, others relied on users' recognition of humor embedded within the original political incident. This approach, in accordance with McGhee and Goldstein's insights (2012), encouraged users to extract humor from the news item itself. This humor not only entertained but also contributed to the overall success of the campaigns.

In nutshell, the analysis of Newsjacking Characteristics in Sri Lankan Newsjacking Campaigns has highlighted the significance of rapid response, audience relevance, and humor as key elements in the effectiveness of these campaigns. Brands that harnessed these characteristics successfully not only engaged their audiences but also left a lasting impression in a dynamic media landscape in the public relation perspective. As newsjacking PR practice continues to evolve as a powerful marketing strategy,

understanding and applying these characteristics will be essential for brands aiming to capture the attention of an ever-demanding and discerning audience.

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