

# A Facebook Account of One's Own

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## 1 Extended Abstract

Virginia Woolf wrote about the importance of an own space and own money for women to enable them to realize their true potential in her famous piece “A Room of One’s Own” [1]. Paraphrasing Woolf, we wish to argue for the potential of a social media account of one’s own for the empowerment of rural women. Understanding the account as a space which a woman can create and define according to her own liking and purposes, allows us to explore the dynamics of female empowerment through social media, as our research interest focuses on under which conditions social media can become transformative in human development [2].

The worldwide explosion of mobile use has been followed by the social media explosion. Even in the global South, the dispersion of mobile technologies has paved way to an ever extensive use of social media. In Sri Lanka, the context of the current study, 1.5 million cellular mobile connections and over 300,000 broadband and dial-up internet connections were subscribed in 2016, increasing country’s Internet penetration to 30% and the total number of Internet users to a 6.1 million – the total population being 21 million [3].

This paper reports on a longitudinal study investigating the appropriation and use of ICTs in a specific context of rural Sri Lanka where telecentres were established over a decade ago in the ambitious aim of building an island-wide infrastructure of accessibility to the ICTs through these establishments [4]. The original goal of providing access to the technology and training in the use of it, to the whole population has been only partially realised as the original financial model of telecentres has proven to be unsustainable. In addition, telecentres are not reaching out to the

whole population. Geographically, it can be noted that remote, rural areas with underprivileged population cannot maintain telecentres. Demographically, telecentres seem to reach out to younger population only. Even a gender difference can be identified: women are often poorly represented among telecentre users.

For these reasons, a longitudinal study was initiated in 2015 with the purpose of organizing sequential educational training interventions in the telecentres for women and school children and studying the effects of these interventions. Here we focus on the effects of the interventions and on the development of the ICT appropriation of a group of women in their thirties and forties. We have studied their media ownership, exposure and use through media surveys and through collaborative workshops where the potential of the ICTs has been demonstrated and the participants have been able to test the technologies.

Our results demonstrate the diffusion of ICTs: increasing number of women own the technology now. They also show an increasing variation of the use – the mobile is no longer just a telephone for conversations but the social media is becoming increasingly known and used. Particularly Facebook accounts have become a common feature. In the group of ten women, two years ago, not one knew about Facebook, today, eight of them have an account of their own, and all of them are well-informed of this technology. The use of the technology/account is well-integrated into the everyday life of these women, illustrating how women tend to have a pragmatic relation to technologies. Women use the Facebook account in relation to issues that are important to them: family and friends, social engagements, social relations, business activities, voluntary work. In the resource-constrained environments of tea estates, social media seem to evoke innovative organic uses of the technology well-grounded in the socialities of the communities. Facebook accounts are an example of the spaces of one's own that expand the lifeworld of these women facilitating new, innovative opportunities to define themselves as active participants in the modern world, despite of their geographically remote rural location.

This longitudinal study gives us a unique opportunity to follow and analyse a development and make important observations of the innovative appropriation dynamics. Our results suggest that interventions alone cannot make a difference for the development but there are other more crucial factors, such as community dynamics and social influencers that are

more significant in a community oriented context for female empowerment.

### **References**

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