SEVENTEEN

BEING BADASS AND THE SASSY HINDU *NAARI*: CASTE AND THE MAKING OF POPULAR FEMINISM IN INDIA

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The paper explores the stakes of popular feminism in India as it interacts with the everyday realities of gender, caste, and class. Further, it critically explores how popular feminism is strategically employing the politics of race and caste, to meet its needs. The paper focuses on the politics of hyper (in)visibilization by popular feminism as a means to run a rather violent project of perpetuating structural forms of violence under the disguise of "sassy feminism." The paper employs performance and content analysis of a popular feminist Instagram page called bebadass.in for this purpose.

Introduction

In India, there has been a recent rise of "unapologetically" feminist pages, particularly on Instagram. This surge could be read in conversation with the politics of popular feminism, postfeminism, and neoliberal feminism across the globe. The paper will expand the scope of understanding 'popular feminism' (otherwise dominated by white feminist scholarship) by exploring its messy unfolding in India as

it interacts with its complex social realities. I will undertake this process through
performance and content analysis of an Instagram page called 'Bebadass.in'. For
this paper, I focus on a few posts of the page to shed light on the politics behind
the larger patterns of hyper-(in)visibilizing performances of some identities over
others. I argue that the performance of 'feminism' by the page is seeped into the
politics of caste, along with strategically employing and appropriating the politics
of race to advance the power of oppressive institutions, rather than challenging
them.

What is 'Popular feminism'?

Popular feminism, as Banet Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017) argue refers to
the existence of a "market-based production and reproduction of a feminist poli-
tics. . . that seems to explicitly recognize that inequality exists while stopping short
of recognizing, naming, or disrupting the political-economic conditions that allow
that inequality to be profitable" (886). Whereas, postfeminism is engaged with
the undoing of feminism, it celebrates a gendered "freedom" in which women are
free to choose what they want to become (McRobbie, 2004). Neoliberal femi-
nism, on another side, clearly avows gender inequality "to spawn a new feminist
subject, one who accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care"
(Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, 7). With these hyper-individualizing feminisms, all
three phenomena work together to "promote "happiness" and "go-getting" rather
than justice or liberation as the end or aim." (Dosekun 2020, 144).

Performing popular feminism by Instagram pages?

Before diving deeper into the analysis of Bebadass.in page, I would like to invite
us to engage with some questions that are central to the arguments I made in
this paper, such as: How can Instagram pages perform feminism? What does it
mean for non-human elements (such as various kinds of digital infrastructures) to
perform politics? Performance studies scholar Richard Schechner (2006) wrote,
"[a]ny behavior, event, action, or thing can be studied 'as' performance" (40). In
this sense, performance studies explores bodies, identities, events, and narratives
in terms of "the myriad ways in which meaning is created and social life is shaped"
(Pearson & Shanks 2001, xiii). Leekar et al. using Barad's (2003) work write:

Contemporary technological apparatuses and media provoke new forms of
'intra-action' between what is usually considered to be either human or machinic
agency, to use Barad's terminology of posthumanist performativity (Barad 2003).
In this sense, digital cultures are performative cultures. They condition and are

shaped by techno-social processes and agencies, and they afford new possibilities
for performative practices and interventions. It follows that the study of per-
formativity in its heterogeneous dimensions cannot afford to ignore the agential
forces and effects of digital technologies and their entanglements with human bod-
ies. They assert the need to rethink 'performance' and 'performativity' to include
the 'performances' by non-human elements as well, to argue that "digital devices
and infrastructures perform, and they make humans (and non-humans) perform"
(Leekar et al. 2017, 11).

In this sense, the popular feminist pages such as Bebadass.in with the affor-
dances of the platform of Instagram (in this case), interact with humans (with
their own politics and sensibilities) to hyper(in)visiblize the performance of some
identities over others, in ways that conform to the neoliberal, caste-based order. In
other words, the 'page' as a digital object performs politics in a way that enables
the strengthening of larger systems of power.

BeBadass.in, "Empowering women with a dose of sass"

The page Bebadass.in actively curates "feminist" content that is dominantly being
created by influencers from Western countries (including the Indian diaspora),
which could talk to the issues that 'Indian' women face. Through this, the page
performs a brand of feminism, one in which being empowered is inflected by the
centrality of being sassy or badass. The content and curation of the page, rather
than engaging with the issues of the women it aims to cater to, advances an
aspiration for the women to work towards, to be 'empowered'. This aspiration
is marked with a certain sense of fashion, a seemingly nonchalant-effortless style
in appearance, being youthful, and exuding 'sass' in one's prompt comebacks to
patriarchy. I draw attention to the normalized oppressive caste and gender-based
politics in this sense of "fashion" and "sass".

Popular feminism functions through a presentation of the crisis of inequality.
It then engages with the neoliberal culture to create a 'market for empowerment.'
Bebadass.in presents this "crisis", as elucidated by Nikita Dixit (founder of the
page) in her interview, in the apparent 'lack of information that women could
access about issues that concern them.' Through this assertion of a crisis, it creates
a market of content for empowerment aiming to address this crisis. I argue that
for popular feminism to operate in the context of India, it needs to perpetuate and
uphold brahminical structures of power. This perpetuation is advanced through a
strategy of hyper-inviblizing the discourse of caste by the page, which is made to

happen by hyper-visiblizing or creating an 'Indian' identity (in this case an Indian woman/femme identity) marked by the markers of Brahminical patriarchy.

The making of the sassy/badass "Hindu Naari"

To begin with this unpacking, let's understand what being 'sassy' or 'badass' means. The use of the term 'badass' since the 1950s has been associated with the figure of the 'badass nigger' which was introduced as "the black man who refuses to meekly submit to white society" (Shiedlower, 2017). Whereas, the word sassy emerged as a variation on saucy, from the idea that words can be zesty, sharp, or spicy. Bebadass.in seems to draw its sassiness by engaging with templates of clapbacks; a powerful rhetorical tool used by Black women, that denote a quick-witted, direct rebuttal of an insult or aggression, typically in social media exchanges (Washington, 2021). Citing Jacuinde (2019), Washington elaborates that "the rebuke or clapback aims to renegotiate social relationships by setting the offender straight or putting them in their place" (364). Hence, sass could be connected to this rhetorical tool of clapback as well as with badassery, as a way of challenging authorities that might appear rude to people in power.

The performance of this 'sass' or 'badassery' could be seen through a recent post by the Bebadass.in page, an illustration by a young urban artist based out of India, Divya Soni (@ilyustrate) (See Figure 17.0.1). The post is a digital portrait of a young Hindu woman. The portrait could be seen as an example of a postfeminist embodiment of Hindu femininity. Drawn against a pale green background, the woman looks towards the viewers with her large kohled eyes. As she wears a pallu covering her head, she is not coy or shy, as is stereotypically expected from women. The use of colors and sequins highlights her embracing femininity. Despite an obsession with fair skin tones in India, the markedness of the brown skin color is crucial to note here. The style of wearing the pallu by covering her head, the rich fabric material, the embroidery, and the jewelry are markers of her dominant caste status. A part of her hand is visible in the picture that shows a middle finger to the viewers. A dialogue box reads "Adjust, Compromise, Sacrifice. That's how it works." As a comeback, her response reads "No."

Whereas, the choice of 'browning' her skin highlights the desire to be connected with the flows of the global 'brown' girl category (Rao, 2022), the spectacular embracing of a dominant caste hindu femininity can be seen as an embodiment of a distinct form of postfeminist sensibility, marked by a "gendered confidence."

This spectacular embracing of dominant caste hindu femininity can be observed across different examples on this page, as well as on others. For instance,
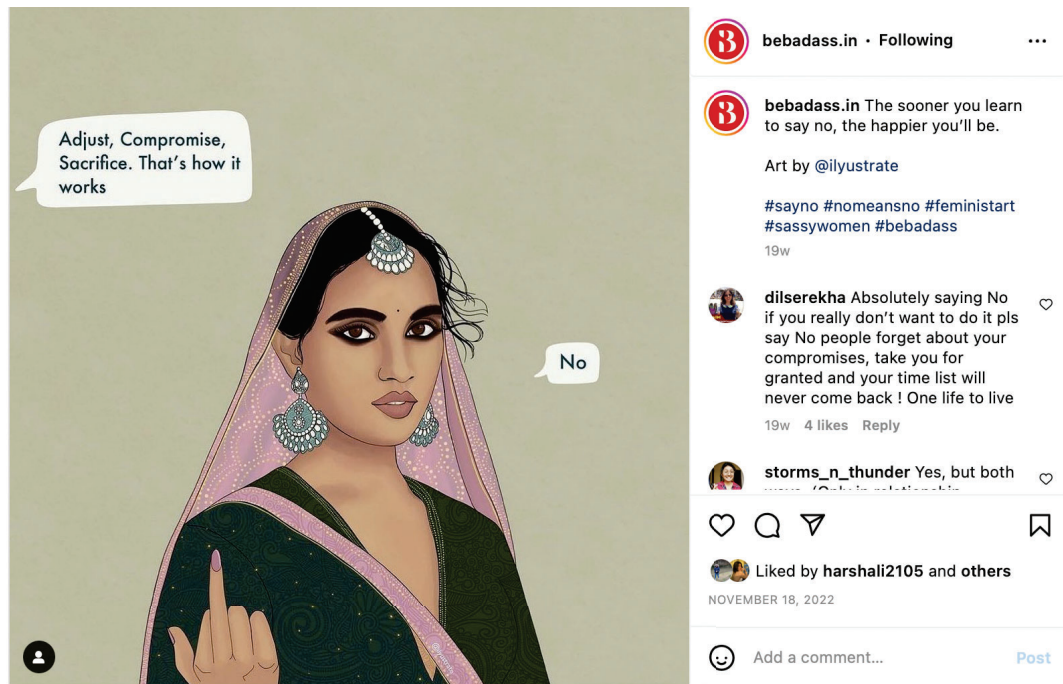
Figure 17.0.1: The sassy Hindu Naari

a recent post by the page (see figure 17.0.2) prompts its audience to share that
they are a "Desi daughter", "without telling us you're a desi daughter". This re-
cent trend on social media encourages people to share through objects, pictures,
and memories about a particular identity without necessarily using 'words' but
symbols of various kinds. The interesting choice of Bollywood film actor Deepika
Padukone's character that belongs to a rajput caste in the controversial film *Paad-
mavat*, again speaks to my argument. In addition to using a picture in which a
woman is dressed according to the norms of caste as symbolic of 'desi daughter', it
is also interesting to think about this choice of using this picture (of this particu-
lar character) despite the caste and gender-based debates that became extremely
popular before the release of the film.[1] Similarly, another post (see figure 17.0.3),
inspired by the Bollywood actress Rekha, presents yet another case for an em-
bracing of a distinct postfeminist embodiment of hindu femininity. The woman is
adorned with Jewellery, flowers, and expensive silk robes. Similar to figure 17.0.1,
this portrait also highlights the brown skin tone, resistance to the stereotypical
expectation of being coy or shy associated with such an attire, and answering back

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[1]See 'Padmavati's Kin: A Conflict without Contradictions' by Pushpendra Jo-
har to understand the caste-based politics behind Deepika Padukone's character,
https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/padmavati-s-kin-a-conflict-without-contradictions/, See
'The deafening silence of feminists in the Padmavati fracas' by Deeksha Bharadwaj to read more
about the controversy and the silence around it, https://theprint.in/opinion/silence-feminists-
padmavati-fracas/17177/.

Figure 17.0.2: The Desi daughter

to society's expectations, with the expression "Urgh…" as a response to the lines "Desi parents will say 'you haven't seen the world, and won't let you see the world as well'" (translated). However, in contrast, to figure 17.0.1, her lack of interest in caring or engaging with the 'society' is performed by the act of looking away from the audience, instead of at them. Her disengagement can be read as an 'insult or aggression' towards the authority (as expanded in the work of Washington, 2021), which forms the sassiness or badassery in this case.

Whereas in figure 17.0.1, the utterance of the word "No" is performative of sassy feminism due to its quick-witted, monosyllabic reply (like a clapback performance). These performances when read in juxtaposition with the postfeminist embodiment of Hindu femininity, create an effect of being badass. However, these performances of sass limit themselves to establishing that "feminism is having a moment." (Banet Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017, 885).

Rather than engaging with the murky terrains and violence that accompanies when one says no, or insults the patriarchal authorities, the page signals that one could be empowered/ 'become a feminist' simply by the utterance of the word or an expression. The "act of saying no" or insulting then is an end, and the means are unnecessary to be discussed. Therefore, this brand of feminism makes feminism into a list of seemingly achievable things, "happy objects" as articulated
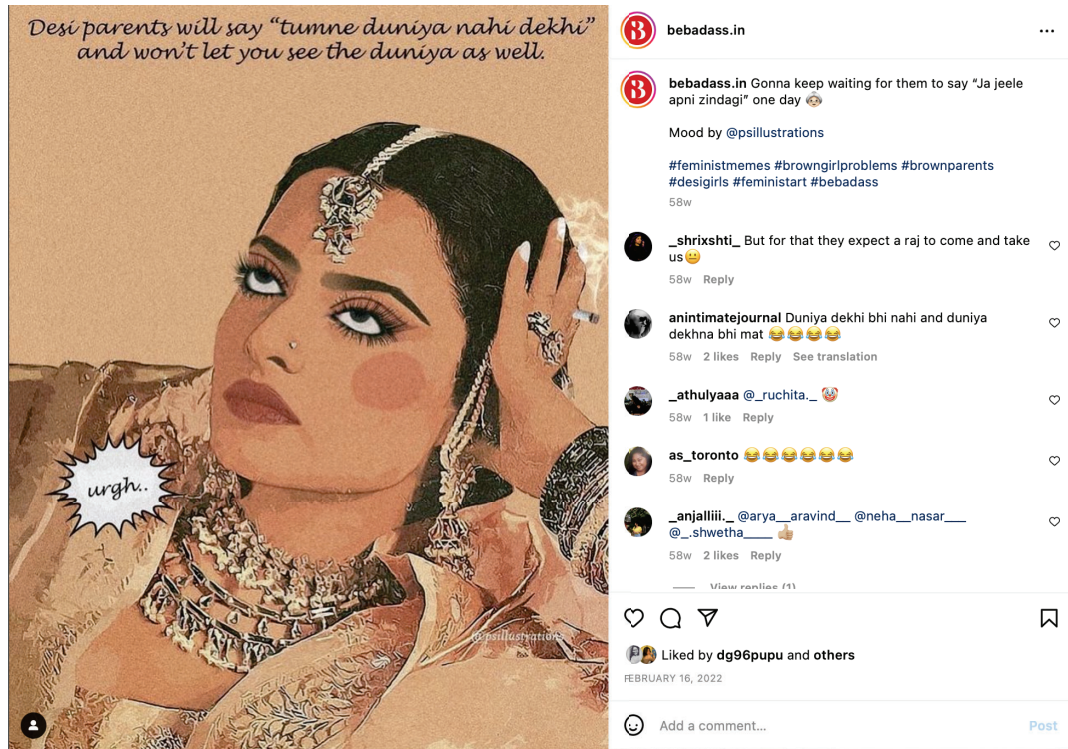
Figure 17.0.3: Sass through insult by not caring

by Sara Ahmed (2010). In the case of the first post then, the page makes "saying no" into a happy object, where through the post, its audience is being suggested that to be empowered it is crucial to find your path towards this happy object. In addition, to move towards the happy object of "saying no", it is also crucial for the audience "to inhabit the right bodies" (Ahmed 2010, 34). As "we have to work on the body such that the body's immediate reactions, how we sense the world and make sense of the world, take us in the "right" direction"(ibid), the posts suggest that the right bodies to inhabit to be able to find happiness are essentially and reductively that of the dominant caste Hindu woman.

The risks and profits of rebelling

As popular feminists performatively challenge inequalities, they still garner hostile and violent responses from patriarchal forces. Despite this, why does bebadass.in being the 'happy feminist' page, attempt to question the systems of power by making the "aadarsh hindu naari" (ideal Hindu woman) trope, speak back? Such apparent risks that the page takes are crucial for visibility as Instagram "propagates and rewards images which display and validate neoliberal ideals and constructions of femininity" (Mahoney 2022, 522). Additionally, the page collaborates

with other neoliberal entrepreneurial projects to accumulate capital by extracting profits from the systems of inequalities that they perform to fight against/invisiblize.

As postfeminism "hails and welcomes into its fold diverse and distanciated subjects who have the material, discursive, and imaginative capital to buy into it" (Dosekun 2020, 14), the markers of Hindu femininity which pass as "Indian-ness" play a crucial role here. The postfeminist embodiment of Hindu femininity becomes the diverse and distanciated object/subject; subjects who can purchase and embody the required material capital to be a feminist. By using such images, at one end the page conforms to the diktats of the algorithm and on the other end, the seemingly confrontational nature of the post brings about conflict, hence more engagement. Therefore, these small risks feed into making the post (and the page) grow in the economy of visibility.

Caste, "Indian-ness" and violence in the popular feminist pages

The hyper-visiblization of certain kinds of normative "Indian-ness", as highlighted in the paper, by these pages marked and mandated by the politics of the Hindu caste system, needs to be read with the hyper-invisiblization of caste-based violence by pages like these. Sima Shakhsari (2020), in the context of queer people in Iran, asserts that the hypervisibility of some identities over others is implicated in the "biopolitical, ethicopolitical, and necropolitical practices that underlie the division of populations into those who are exceptionally deserving of life. . . and those who are deemed killable" (164). Drawing from their work, I argue that the hyper-invisiblization of caste-based violence and popular feminism's distancing of itself from the discourse of caste is a strategic act in this direction. The hyper-visiblization of demands for justice by some (dominant castes) exists along with the deadly silence on the ever-rising caste violence and its systematic erasure in public discourses and memory.

I take this opportunity to highlight this dangerous phenomenon using some examples. As discussed initially in the paper, the page locates the crisis through which it creates its market by creating and curating content to address the 'lack of information that women could access about issues that concern them'. Therefore, the page constantly posts in response to the various forms of violence that gain attention in popular news media outlets. At the beginning of this year, multiple cases of violence against women populated the headlines of the news in India. The page covered the news of violence against women in metropolitan spaces that
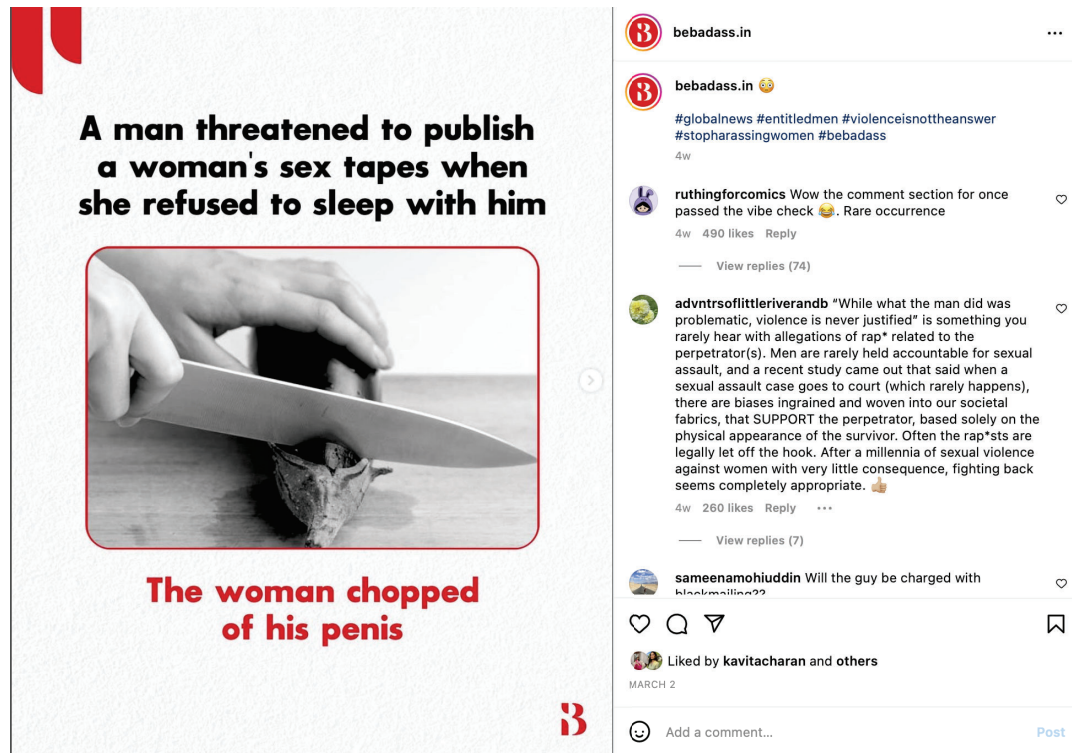
Figure 17.0.4

are dominated by oppressed caste women through different posts as the news was shared in the media (from men harassing women by climbing walls of Miranda House College in Delhi University to the violence and murder of women in live-in relationships) within hours of the stories' release. However, any form of violence against Dalit, Bahujan, or Adivasi women is not shared in any format at all. Building on this, on 2nd March 2023, the news of an Indian court acquitting upper caste men accused of raping a young dalit woman in Hathras broke in the media. The following posts (see figures 17.0.4, 17.0.5 and 17.0.6) were shared that day by the Bebadass.in page: By sharing this, I do not mean to undermine or diminish the issue of Violence Against Women and Queer folx, or issues around body positivity, in general. Rather, I want to highlight how the popular feminist pages mark the lives that are "deemed killable" through their hyper-invisiblization of some identities, stories, and narratives. Therefore, behind the happy projects of popular feminism on social media, enmeshed with the economics and politics of visibility, collaborations, and content creation and curation; are deaths, massacres, and dehumanization of the most oppressed communities.
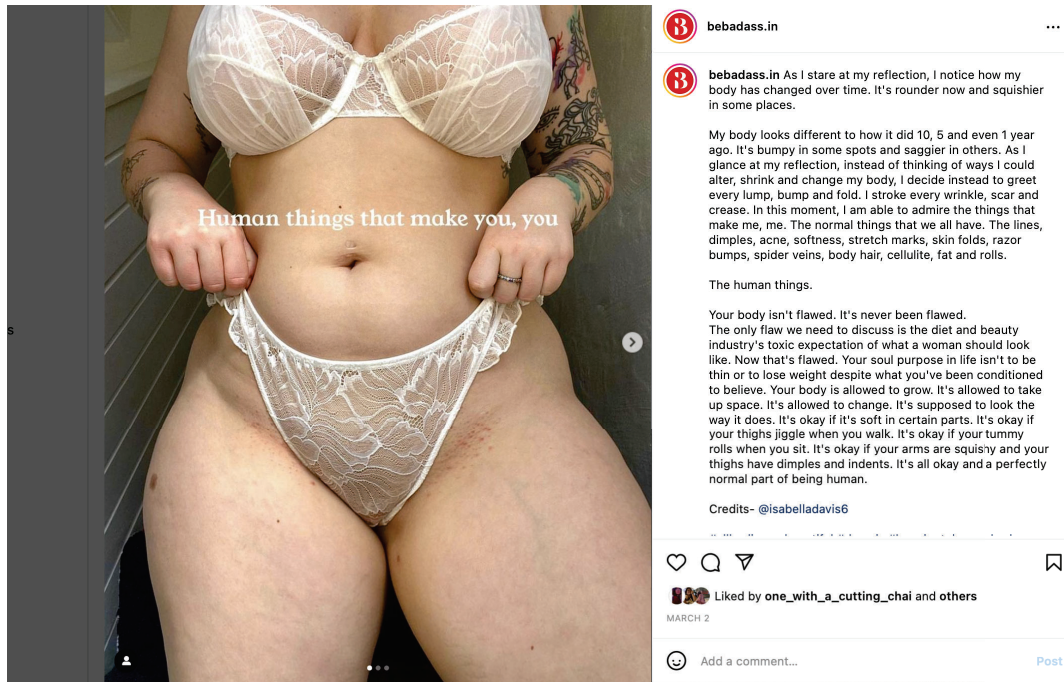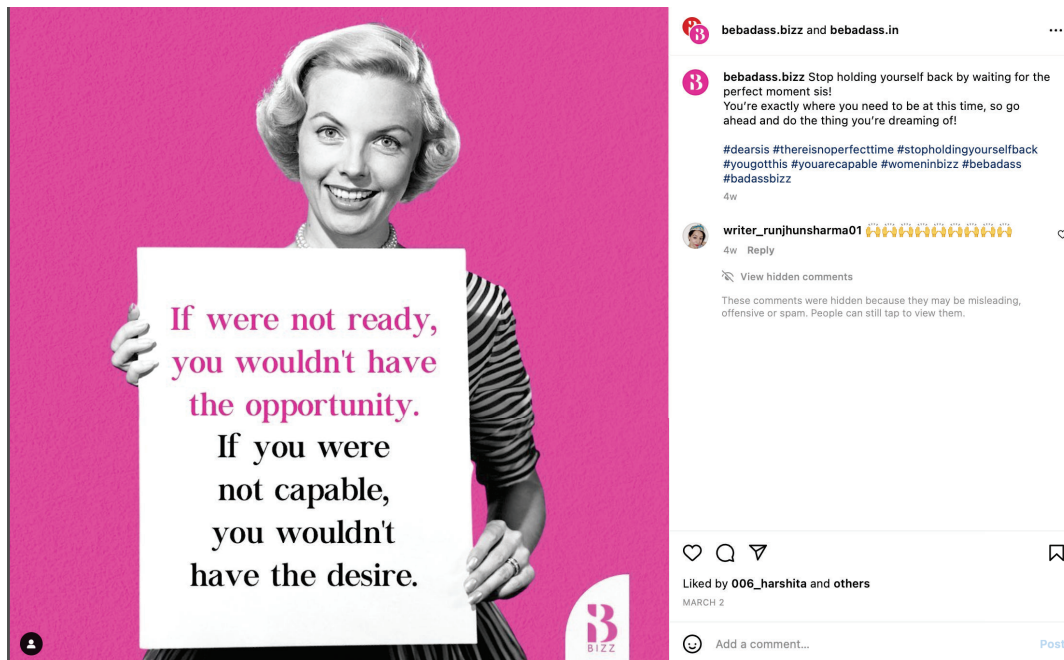
Figure 17.0.5

Figure 17.0.6

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Citation