

## #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar: The Evolution of the Digital Fight Against Authoritarian State Repression

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This study examines #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar and attempts to understand the practice of hashtags in the struggle against digital repression. By using descriptive analysis methods and qualitative content analysis, this study argues that #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar is categorized into 4 distinct narrative forms: Grievance expression, information dissemination, attracting support, and mobilization. Each narrative fulfills different functions within the context of the struggle against digital repression. Grievance expression challenges social manipulation and disinformation. Information dissemination tackles censorship and social manipulation/disinformation. Attracting support helps keep the conversation about Myanmar active on social media even when the Internet is shut down. Finally, the mobilization narrative helps protect protesters and online users from state surveillance and persecution. Through analyzing the hashtag narrative, this study offers resourceful findings on how activists have used social media against digital repression and on the evolution of resistance to struggle against new types of state repression.

*Keywords: Myanmar, activism, digital repression, social movement, #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar*

Despite the Internet being introduced as a space for liberation, it has turned into an area of repression in recent years as many governments, especially authoritarian regimes, started tightly controlling their digital space using various methods (Feldstein, 2021; Frantz, Kendall-Taylor, & Wright, 2020). This experience of repression is occurring in a significant number of states, including Myanmar. After the military coup in February 2021, digital repression dramatically intensified when communication services were blacked out across the country (Weir, 2021). Later, several forms of digital repression were introduced throughout the Spring Revolution, and they have continued until today. To fight against the digital repression conducted by the junta, local revolutionary groups have initiated several online campaigns to secure online

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communications as a space of liberation and to disseminate information to both domestic and international communities. Shunlei Yi (2022), a Burmese activist, called this series of campaigns the "SMART Revolution," a term that will be explained later in the article. The #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar activism, which is one significant part of this campaign, is the main focus of this study, which aims to develop our understanding of the activist response to digital repression by one of the most brutal militaries in the world.

This study examined the #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar campaign and attempted to understand the practice of hashtags in the struggle against digital repression. The primary research question concerned how activists use hashtags to fight against state repression. This study focused on the agency of activists due to their leading role in online activism and domination on Twitter (currently known as X). By using several qualitative approaches, including the descriptive analysis method, content analysis, interviews, and secondary data, the study found that four distinct narratives emerged from the hashtag, including grievance expression, information dissemination, attracting support, and movement mobilization. These narratives effectively serve different functions within the context of the movement and their struggle against digital repression employed by the state, reflecting and influencing the work of the anti-coup movement in various ways. The grievance expression narrative challenges social manipulation and disinformation conducted by the junta. Information dissemination is employed to tackle state censorship and misinformation. Attracting support helps keep the conversation about Myanmar active on social media when the military government has shut down the Internet. Finally, the movement mobilization narrative helps protect protesters and online users from state surveillance and persecution.

The long-term studies of activism under authoritarian governance show that the practices of activism have evolved over time, in parallel with the regime tactics and strategies that have been developed to restrict freedom of expression and association (Barrow & Fuller, 2022; Cavatorta, 2012; Kurtz & Smithy, 2018). Civil societies always navigate ways to fight against the state and its authoritarian governance practices by creating and adopting new approaches to resistance. For instance, the Zapatista movement decided to "scale shift" its campaign by spreading its contention beyond its local origin, introducing new frames to attract international support and increase its leverage power with the local government (Tarrow & McAdam, 2005). Social media platforms were adapted to mobilize demonstrations during the Arab Spring (Ghonim, 2012; Holmes, 2012) and the Umbrella Movement (Lee & Chan, 2016). Additionally, underground activist networks were created in Myanmar, where there are no domestic political opportunities and the state is isolated and sanctioned by the international community (Boudreau, 2004; Prasse-Freeman, 2012). However, the activists' attempts to combat a new type of state repression, known as "digital repression," are still understudied.

While digital repression has been increasing dramatically and systematically in recent years, there are only a few studies that have discussed how activists respond to it. Feldstein (2021) addresses how activists and democratic states should fight against this new type of repression. His study proposes several suggestions for the response and strategies, separated into three main categories: Raising repression costs, grassroots strategies, and private sector responsibilities (Feldstein, 2021). Additionally, Urman, Ho, and Katz (2021) discussed how Hong Kong activists and supporters used Telegram after realizing that other social media platforms could be easily surveilled by the state. However, these studies discussed how activists avoided confrontation with digital repression rather than how they could counter it.

According to Castells (2007), network communications and social media fundamentally transform power relations within the state by providing individuals more ability to apply "counter-power." Digital communication technologies also help ordinary citizens produce a "counter-narrative" against the institutionalized state narrative represented in state-controlled media (Al-Ani, Mark, Chung, & Jones, 2012). Although these concepts were developed before the expansion of digital repression, and mainly focused on counter-state power in offline spaces, this study found that social media remain a tool for counter-state power in current events. By analyzing the narrative of #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar, this study offers insightful findings on the new digital environment where the state and activists compete to secure this space for their own interests. Additionally, it shows how activists have used social media and examines the evolution of resistance strategies that have been developed to combat the new types of state repression.

This article consists of six more sections, including the conclusion. The next section explains the data collection process, research methodology, and limitations. Following that, there is a discussion of the concept of digital repression and its functioning in other cases. Then, a general summary of digital repression in Myanmar under the current junta is provided. The subsequent section broadly describes how protesters use digital spaces to counter state repression and the origin of the #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar campaign. The fifth section presents the research findings with a discussion of the four primary narrative forms and motivations for the protesters to implement the hashtag campaign. It also examines how these different narratives illustrate the various forms of resistance from the opposition group.

### **Data, Methods, and Limitations**

To address the research question, a total of 2,000 tweets containing #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar, along with data from an interview and secondary sources, were collected. The top 2,000 results of a search query under the hashtag from February 1 to March 24, 2021, were randomly obtained using Twitter's application programming interface on June 5, 2021. This time frame was chosen to capture the emergence of the #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar as it coincided with the peak of the hashtag's popularity and a period of severe digital repression. After obtaining the data, I went through all tweets one by one, filtering out unqualified tweets, which contained messages unrelated to this sociopolitical issue, such as commercial content or nonrelevant posts. Only a small number of tweets, less than 1%, were considered unqualified.

This research employed a descriptive analysis method and thematic content analysis, with the goal of identifying, explaining, and understanding the campaign on Twitter (Khadafi, Nurmandi, Qodir, & Misran, 2022). It also used MAXQDA Analytic Pro software for coding and categorizing the tweets based on the perceived theme of each post. The study found that the descriptive analysis method could help explore the characteristics of the phenomena (Lambert & Lambert, 2012), while thematic content analysis was used to discover patterns, capture themes, and analyze narratives in hashtags (Anderson, 2007). To conduct thematic content analysis, various elements were considered, including narrative, words, emotions, tags, and any other hashtags used in the tweets. Once themes were established, the different themes were grouped together if they exhibited similarity in terms of emotion and discourse, thus larger sets of narratives were created. Finally, following the approach used by Sinpeng (2021), a subset of tweets from each category was randomly selected by focusing on messages related to the demonstrations. Qualitative content analysis,

along with interviews and secondary data, was also conducted to gain a deeper understanding of how users employed the hashtag.

This study relies on several qualitative research methods, including descriptive analysis, thematic content analysis, content analysis, interviews, and secondary data, to analyze the discourse surrounding the hashtag and how activists used it to resist digital repression during the early days of the anti-coup movement in Myanmar. It is undeniable that using a limited amount of data may be considered undesirable since it could restrict our understanding of the hashtag's nature and its actual role in the offline movement. However, the main strength of this approach lies in its ability to highlight the different narrative themes of the hashtag and to facilitate a more profound and insightful analysis of how users perceive and employ the hashtag. Such an in-depth analysis would have been challenging to achieve through a macro-level analysis. To address this limitation, a random sampling approach was adopted to collect tweet data, and interviews were conducted with local activists while data from secondary sources were collected to strengthen the analysis.

It should be noted that tweets written in English were not modified, thus ensuring that their original wording was preserved; therefore, some of the messages presented below might have spelling and/or grammar mistakes. Messages translated from Burmese or other languages have been mentioned as translations. Additionally, tweets displayed in this study have been cited as anonymous due to concerns regarding user privacy and security amid the rising digital repression in Myanmar and other places around the world.

There are several difficulties and limitations in conducting research on social media in Myanmar, especially after the military coup, which should be noted here. First, there is severe state repression. For instance, the junta has constantly shut down Internet connections and banned social media platforms. These prohibitions have sometimes caused information on social media platforms to disappear temporarily. Second, activists respond to state repression by developing strategies to cope with the situation and safeguard their identity and location when discussing politics online. These tactics include using virtual private networks (VPNs), encrypted messaging apps such as Signal, and relocating to neighboring countries where it is safer. The multitude of strategies used by activists to combat state repression renders much coding software inapplicable to this study, making it impossible to track the location of users and provide a more nuanced explanation of the demographics of responders.

### **Digital Repression: When the Digital Sphere Is No Longer Free**

In the early days of social media, many scholars saw it as a critical space for activists and ordinary citizens to create campaigns to fight authority since it brought activists the power to organize movements without formal structure organizations (Shirky, 2008) and made possible a distinctive logic of "connective action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Unfortunately, the state eventually reclaimed this space, using it as a tool to serve its political interests and repress dissent in recent years. Feldstein (2021) described this state action as "digital repression," which is defined as "the use of information and communication technology to surveil, coerce, or manipulate individuals or groups in order to deter specific activities or beliefs that

challenge the state" (p. 25). This kind of repression is likely to be much more robust in an undemocratic regime, but it can also exist in a democratic one (Sinpeng, 2013).

The taxonomy of digital repression categorizes it into five broad areas (Feldstein, 2021). First, "social media/digital surveillance" is how political actors use technology and technical means to gather information and data for political use (Brown, 2015). The state may use various surveillance strategies for this purpose, such as passive surveillance, targeted surveillance, artificial intelligence, big data, and surveillance laws (Feldstein, 2021). Second, "censorship" is the suppression and restriction through laws, regulations, or actions to block access to certain information and content (Feldstein, 2021). Third, "social manipulation and disinformation" refers to the intentional attempt to shape society's narratives and beliefs by disseminating false information, propaganda, and fake news and engaging in online harassment (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). Fourth, "Internet shutdowns" involve the intentional action by state authorities to disconnect the Internet or mobile networks in a specific geographic area (Wagner, 2018). Finally, persecution against online users for political content includes targeted arrests, physical attacks, legal charges, prolonged detention, and violence directed at online users (Feldstein, 2021). The choice of digital repression varies depending on a state's capacity and its digital infrastructure. For example, a country with a lower level of Internet infrastructure development is likely to shut down the Internet or persecute online users through law enforcement. In comparison, a country with a higher level of Internet infrastructure tends to use surveillance strategies and advanced technology, such as artificial intelligence (AI).

In recent years, activists across the world have faced these new challenges when conducting activism as state repression has spread into online spaces. For instance, the Chinese government has developed AI to ensure state control and the continuity of the authoritarian order (Zeng, 2020). There are frequent Internet shutdowns in several states, such as Pakistan (Wagner, 2018) and Ethiopia (Ayalew, 2019). Additionally, state-linked accounts play a crucial role in influencing social narratives in Thailand (Thomas, Beattie, & Zhang, 2020). This trend of repression has been critically changing our understanding of the nature of the digital environment and has led to further questions on how activists should respond to this new relationship with the state.

### **The Expansion of Digital Repression in Myanmar: Before and After the Coup**

Following the introduction of affordable Internet packages and smartphones to ordinary citizens in 2013, the number of Internet users in Myanmar dramatically increased, from 500,000 users when the reform began (Kyaw, 2019) to 23.65 million users in 2021 (Kemp, 2021), which is approximately 45% of the population. Smartphone adoption has helped integrate social media and digital technology into local everyday life and contributes numerous benefits to society. For example, the operators of trishaws, a light three-wheeled vehicle, have adopted mobile services to strengthen consumer ties and increase their daily income (Ling, Oreglia, Aricat, Panchapakesan, & Lwin, 2015). On the other hand, the Internet also has some drawbacks for society, and digital repression is a significant component of this.

Digital repression is not a new issue in Myanmar as two kinds of digital repression were widely used before the coup. First, Internet shutdown is one tactic usually used by both the military and the civilian government. The most apparent case of an Internet shutdown was when the central government started

enforcing Internet restrictions in eight townships in Chin and Rakhine states since June 21, 2019, making it the world's longest Internet shutdown. This blackout occurred due to the state's attempt to control the flow of information regarding the armed struggle between the military and the Arakan Army group ("Myanmar: End World's Longest," 2020). Second, social media constitute a space where ultranationalist groups use social manipulation, disinformation, and persecution against online users for their posts on political content (Kyaw, 2019; Whitten-Woodring, Kleinberg, Thawngmung, & Thitsar, 2020). This kind of repression was apparent during the Rohingya crisis wherein digital media were the main arena for spreading extreme and dangerous speeches about the Muslim minority and fake news regarding the situation in Rakhine state (Fink, 2018; Lee, 2019).

After the 2021 military coup to overthrow the civilian government, digital repression became intense across the country. Immediately after the coup, the junta blacked out the country by shutting down most communication channels, including the Internet and mobile phone networks (Weir, 2021). The purpose of the shutdown was to control the flow of information, block communication channels, and prevent any resistance reaction that might come from civilians and activists. At the same time, the army also developed the four-cuts strategy into a five-cuts strategy to suppress the resistance groups (Shunlei Yi, 2022). The four-cuts strategy was the army's counterinsurgency plan that was first initiated in the 1960s to counter insurgent groups and urban pro-democracy activists between 1988 and 2010. The aim was to reduce the capacity of insurgent groups in border areas through the blockage of food, funds, intelligence, and recruits as well as through the popular support of armed resistance groups (Fishbein, Lusan, & Vahpual, 2021). Recently, this approach was transformed into the five-cuts strategy when the junta added the blockage of the Internet and communications access as the fifth dimension of the strategy.

In practice, the digital repression by the junta can be separated into five strategies. First, the government's attempts at surveillance became more severe after the military coup. On social media platforms, the military-linked accounts were crucial for monitoring and infiltrating activists and protest campaigns during the mass demonstrations (Tran, 2021). On the ground, the military also showed its attempts to extend its control over communication providers, such as privately approving the sale of Telenor, one of the largest telecommunication companies, to the military-linked business group (Paing, 2022). Second, the junta amended the broadcasting law to extend its censorship power to online platforms. The law was previously applied only to broadcasts on television and radio. However, the amendment boosted its ability to cover "any other technology," which implied the inclusion of online news websites and social media platforms (Naing, 2021, para. 3). The junta also resurrected the cybersecurity law to increase its capability to control the flow of information via Internet provider companies and to illegalize VPNs (Strangio, 2022).

Third, online communications are a tool for the military to implement social manipulation and disinformation. According to Ryan and Tran (2022), the military and military-linked Facebook pages have actively employed propaganda and manipulated narratives to make the public turn against the protesters and support the army instead, such as framing protesters as "terrorists" and "rioters" (pp. 12–13). Fourth, the government has attempted to restrict access to the Internet in the country by shutting down the Internet ("Resist Myanmar's Digital Coup," 2022) and increasing phone and SIM card prices through higher SIM and Internet taxes ("Myanmar Junta Raises," 2022) as part of their strategy to suppress and control the flow of

information among opposition groups. Finally, the military adopted a persecution strategy by using military-linked accounts to harass pro-democracy users.

Due to the highly influential role of digital media in Myanmar, it is unsurprising that the digital space is an important site for the struggle between the government and revolutionary resistance groups following the 2021 military coup. The next section explores how the activists have responded to state repression and used communication technologies as a tool to liberate their rights and express their freedom.

### **The Spring Revolution and the Emergence of #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar**

Despite the severe state repression after the military coup, ordinary people and activists are not afraid to express their disappointment with the army in both online and offline spaces. Immediately after the coup, mass demonstrations broke out in major cities, spreading quickly to many other cities and townships across the country. The anti-coup movement, famously known as the Spring Revolution, was led by the youth who introduced several creative and unique protest tactics against the junta (Jordt, Than, & Lin, 2021). Nevertheless, social media have played and continue to play a crucial role in mobilizing and connecting the movement as well as in disseminating information to other places in the country and to international audiences.

The role of digital activism was critical in Myanmar after the coup. Owing to the preexisting digital capacity, local activists possessed the necessary resources and experience to initiate various online strategies and campaigns in response to junta repression (Ryan & Tran, 2022). The term coined for this anti-digital repression campaign was the "SMART Revolution" (Shunlei Yi, 2022), in which "SMART" represents scouting, monitoring, alternative, resistance, and timely. More specific explanations of these terms are listed below:

- "S" refers to scouting and spreading awareness about intelligence and digital security,
- "M" represents monitoring human rights violations and citizen journalists,
- "A" stands for alternative virtual platforms,
- "R" refers to resistance by using different online platforms and campaigns, and
- "T" is timely reporting and taking action for security (Shunlei Yi, 2022)

These campaigns have been very successful as they are able to maintain the connections among activists in different parts of the country, protect them from state surveillance, and create a channel for sharing information. This study is focused on the "A" strategy in the #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar campaign.

The activism campaign on Twitter accelerated rapidly after the military coup and significantly reflected the dynamics of the political situation on the ground. An interview with an anonymous Burmese activist revealed that the significant increase in Twitter users after the coup was due to the severe repression and the attempt to reach a foreign audience. The activist said, "We heard from our friend that Twitter is anonymous, and foreigners are more likely to use Twitter than Facebook. Thus, many activists in Myanmar decided to start using Twitter" (personal communication, November 9, 2022). Consequently, the number of

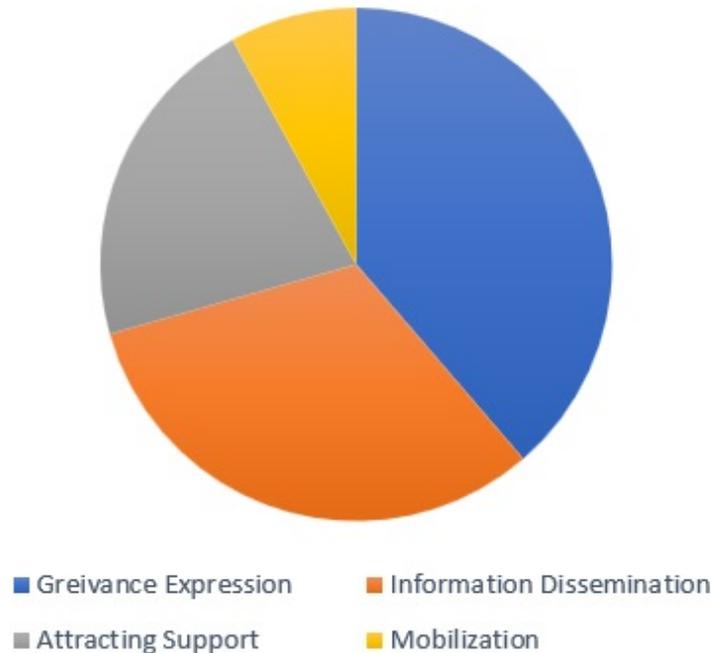
Twitter users in Myanmar grew from an estimated 190,000 in December 2020 to 1.2 million in March 2021, according to StatCounter and DataReportal (Tangen Jr., 2021).

After the coup, a massive number of tweets interacted with various hashtags related to the political situation and ordinary daily struggles, for instance, #SaveMyanmar, #HearTheVoiceofMyanmar, and #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar. However, no hashtag has been able to gain popularity and continuously influence the movement as much as #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar. According to *Nikkei Asia*, the hashtag was posted in nearly 250 million tweets within the first year after the military coup and reached its peak on February 20, 2021, after the confirmation of the first fatality case, with 3.06 million posted in a single day ("Myanmar Citizens Oppose," 2022).

Despite there being a satirical magazine named *What's Happening* launched by Burmese activists in 1990, the ongoing #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar campaign was directly inspired by the #WhatsHappeningInThailand in Thailand. There are several similarities between the "What Is Happening" campaign in Thailand and that in Myanmar. Both hashtags are written in English and other languages and are presented with compelling storytelling elements. Their aim is to notify the international community about the political situation and violence, rather than sharing protest tactics. This storytelling goes directly against the official narrative, which always claims that the situation is under their control and that the protesters are troublemakers who destabilize peace and order. However, the protesters in Myanmar have developed the hashtag beyond merely being an organ for the protest. In particular, the campaign in Myanmar has become the central hashtag activism widely used by the protesters and a critical tool to counter the digital repression of the military regime. This uniqueness warrants a close examination of Twitter's role in the anti-coup movement broadly and the narrative presented in the campaign.

### **The Narrative in #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar**

According to the analysis of the tweets in this study, the hashtag significantly represents the protesters' struggle against state repression and reflects their emotions and discourse. By using a descriptive analysis method and thematic content analysis, the motivation of the #WhatIsHappeningInMyanmar hashtag campaign can be categorized into four themes (Figure 1). First, the protesters express their grievance experiences regarding state repression and their trauma and suffering after the coup. Subcategories under this narrative include sharing instances of violence inflicted by the authorities, condemning the lack of international support, complaining about individuals not supporting the movement, and more. Second, the hashtag is used to disseminate information to domestic and international communities. This narrative includes subcategories such as informing others about the situation during demonstrations, sharing protester demands, and correcting fake news spread by the authorities. Third, many tweets contain a message asking for help and support from domestic and international actors. The subcategory themes under this narrative include demanding international assistance and international armed intervention as well as encouraging more locals to join the movement. Finally, the protesters use the hashtag to mobilize the movement and share protest tactics. The subcategory of this narrative is dominated by explanations of civil disobedience instruction, with a small portion focusing on other issues, such as how to hide one's identity and how to confront the police during crackdowns.



**Figure 1. Motivation for using #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar.**

#### ***Grievance Expression***

The most frequently used narrative in the hashtag is grievance expression, which accounted for approximately 39% of all tweets. These tweets primarily include stories, allegories, and personal experiences about the police and the army's strategies for disbanding protests and their violent conduct. The protesters usually discuss state repression and their personal experiences, expressing their feelings of insecurity and concerns about the lack of safety. They also share their despair regarding the country's future and the unpredictability of life after the coup. Therefore, this narrative not only informs outsiders about the political situation and violence across the country, which is censored by the state, but also fosters a collective sense of victimhood among the citizens, both living abroad and in their homeland. For example, a tweet discussed the Internet shutdown, which is a form of digital repression, and shared concerns regarding the political situation in Myanmar and the safety of the user's family:

As of this afternoon, the military has severed all Internet connections and people have took to the streets of Yangon. Now, the rest of us outside, fear for the safety of our family and friends inside the country. #WhatHappeningInMyanmar #WeNeedDemocracy.  
(personal communication, February 6, 2021)

Apart from expressing concerns about their homeland, many tweeters try to construct a counternarrative against the military's attempt to present itself as a peacekeeper. These messages portray

the military and police as inhumane and savage by tweeting information that reveals the regime as a violator of domestic laws and international human rights norms. A number of negative keywords are frequently used in these tweets to describe the police and military action in suppressing the rallies, such as "genocide," "terrorist," and "brutality." On the other hand, these tweets also attempt to increase awareness of the rightfulness of the uprising by using several positive keywords that are linked to the civil disobedience campaign to represent the protesters, such as "unarmed," "peaceful," and "innocent." For example, a tweet considered the military response to the protest as a terrorist act and a genocide attempt:

South Dagon: Two days consecutive brutal crackdown day & night with the mission to genocide by SAC [State Administration Council] terrorists in this tsp. There are 21 confirmed death and 18 more unverified burnt bodies, at least 40 injured people on Mar 29 and 30. #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar. (personal communication, March 31, 2021)

Another example is a tweet illustrating how military action violates international human rights and Red Cross norms: "Police are threatening the medical team with guns. The lives of young people are no longer safe. Threatening the medical team is a disrespectful act. #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar #Feb27Coup JUNTA BRUTALITY" (personal communication, February 28, 2021).

These tweets critically reflect the social media environment in the postcoup period, where military and military-linked social media accounts actively sought to create a negative image of the resistance group by portraying protesters as "terrorists" and "rioters" (Ryan & Tran, 2022, pp. 12–13). In response to this official narrative, ordinary citizens' tweets emphasize the protesters as advocates of human rights values while portraying the regime as the side that abuses them instead. This narrative underscores the movement's fight against social manipulation and disinformation by the junta and illustrates its attempt to internationalize the demonstrations by using human rights-related keywords to garner more generosity and support from the global community.

The hashtag is not applied only by the demonstrators in the major cities, but people in peripheral areas have also posted several tweets to express their daily grievances. These messages indicate that there is information sharing among activists from various parts of the country. For instance, the tweet provided information about the violence toward a news reporter in Myeik city, Tanintharyi Region: "Trucks of soliders deployed in-front of Myeik DVB [Democratic Voice of Burma] journalist's house at 22:30MMT. Firing slingshots and rubber bullets and threatening him to come down. Not sure whether he got abducted. #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar #Mar1coup" (personal communication, March 2, 2021). Also, another Twitter user wrote to share about the junta's brutality against the protesters in Myitkyina, Kachin State: "WE NEED JUSTICE Today at Myitkyina, the capital city of Kachin State, Military junta brutally beaten and arrested two female teachers who protested peacefully #Feb19Coup #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar" (personal communication, February 20, 2021).

The existence of messages from peripheral areas reflects that the hashtag is used not only by activists in urban areas but also by those from other parts of the country. This dynamic is significantly correlated with changes in the offline world, where interethnic relationships in the postcoup era have evolved due to the increasingly extensive and intensified cross-ethnic solidarity, contrasting with the junta's claims

that it has gained support from all ethnic groups in the country. This has led to various collaborations, such as the establishment of the General Strike Committee of Nationalities and the training of Burmese and other ethnic group fighters by Ethnic Armed Organizations (Hein, 2022). Although this study lacks sufficient data to determine the ethnicity of the users, the growing interethnic solidarity points to a likelihood of the hashtag campaign serving as a platform for such collaborations.

Furthermore, the protesters also use the hashtag to express their disappointment with the international community, international organizations, and some countries regarding their response to the political crisis in Myanmar. In this hashtag, the Chinese government and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are frequently targeted with negative interpretations, while the protesters still hold a favorable view of Western democratic countries. For example, a tweet stated, "China is backing up the Military Junta. #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar #Feb12Coup" (personal communication, February 13, 2021). Another message voiced dissatisfaction with these lines:

ASEAN only interested in their business maintain growing not accounted the will of Myanmar people according to history. We need justice. Honestly until now we cannot trust to ASEAN. Now we need strongly stand up EU and US for justice. #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar #Mar2Coup. (personal communication, March 2, 2021)

Based on the example above, the protesters' displeasure regarding these two international actors differs. With regard to China, the protesters' disappointment originates from the belief that the Chinese government backs the coup and supports the military in using violence against civilians, although, in reality, Beijing seems to be unhappy about the coup (Han, 2021). As for the ASEAN member states, the protesters still had a positive perspective of and expected support from this regional organization in the early days. However, the protesters' frustration with ASEAN began when the organization did not take strong action officially or express a clear stance against the junta as they expected. These messages illustrate the competition between the military regime and the opposition group to gain international recognition and support in the postcoup period (Lin & Thuzar, 2022).

### ***Information Dissemination***

The second most frequently used narrative in the hashtag is information dissemination, accounting for approximately 32% of all tweets. The primary goal of this narrative is to provide information about the general situation in Myanmar and what occurs during the protest days, enabling people to receive information that the government censors. The protesters also use the hashtag to correct fake news, which is a category of digital repression produced by the state. For instance, a tweet that was originally in Burmese conveyed, "It's not true that the military staged the coup because of political turmoil; rather it is reverse case #WhatshappeningInMyanmar" (personal communication, February 9, 2021).

Other Internet users also produce similar messages to combat social manipulation and disinformation by the junta. Several more examples are provided here: "This is an illegal government right now in Myanmar. Please hear our voices. Please know the fake news they are spreading #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar #BurmaCoup @UN @UNHumanRights" (personal communication, February 10, 2021), and "USDP [Union Solidarity and Development Party] is faking military supporters for international news and to stage a conflict

between peaceful protestors and military supporters as a reason for police forces to use violence!!!! #WhatIsHappeningInMyanmar #Feb9Coup” (personal communication, February 10, 2021). Many activists retweeted this type of message to inform the international community about the political situation in Myanmar and to counter fake news produced by the junta. It also expresses the protestors’ views regarding the coup by declaring that the junta’s explanation of the Myanmar issue is nothing more than a massive lie and distortion. Instead, it is the army itself that causes everything to go in the wrong direction and destabilizes peace and security in the country, not the National League for Democracy government or the protestors.

Moreover, activists have commonly used the “retweet strategy” to disseminate information and engage in political discussions. Adopting this strategy, users retweet and add a concise sentence or only a few emoticons to the message. In some cases, they do not even write anything except for #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar, while some users use this hashtag alongside others, such as #SaveMyanmar, #Feb19Coup, #Mar12Coup, #MilkTeaAlliance, and #R2P. The benefits of the retweet strategy are that it helps protestors accelerate information dissemination and transmission speed and also enables the hashtag to trend on Twitter faster and more easily.

This narrative impacts the work of activists both inside and outside the country in various ways, fulfilling its attempt to disseminate information. After the military coup, numerous conferences, seminars, and news related to the political crisis in Myanmar incorporated #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar into their event names (e.g., Kipgen & Pareira, 2021; “#WhatsHappeningInMyanmar,” 2021). This illustrates how activists and observers from different nations have used this flagship hashtag campaign to raise awareness of the violence and repression in Myanmar, a situation the junta sought to control through digital censorship and disinformation.

An example of these campaigns was a series of events hosted by Southeast Asia (SEA) Junction in collaboration with renowned activist news outlets such as The Irrawaddy and Mizzima, all titled #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar. These events aimed to enhance understanding of the situation and support the anti-coup movement in Myanmar (“#WhatshappeninginMyanmar Bi-Weekly,” 2021). Typically, these events invited Burmese individuals, representatives from other ethnic groups, and foreign observers to participate and exchange information about the situation in Myanmar. This campaign, along with others that used the hashtag as their name, significantly represented information dissemination narratives in the digital sphere and also affected the work of activists and observers in an offline space toward combating censorship, social manipulation, and disinformation by the junta.

### ***Attracting Support***

The narrative of attracting support is the third most frequently used narrative in the hashtag, accounting for roughly 21% of all the tweets. In this narrative, the protestors usually write messages seeking support or suggesting how the domestic and international communities can support democracy and the protestors; they do so by using keywords such as “please,” “help,” “save,” and “attention.” These tweets often tag international organizations and foreign governments, alongside other hashtags, such as #MilkTeaAlliance, to gain support and share information with young activists based in other Asian countries and territories. These messages are significantly correlated with actions in the offline space, where the resistance group attempts to gain international recognition and assistance (Lin & Thuzar, 2022).

Also, a few tweets have mentioned famous foreign activists and celebrities. For example, an anonymous user tagged Rihanna, a famous American singer, with the expectation that she would raise her voice to support the protesters in Myanmar: "@Rihanna Myanmar junta killed an unarmed 19yr old girl and shot other protesters during the Democracy demonstration in 9 Feb 2021. We desperately need help from all nations around the globe. JUNTA VIOLENCE #Feb10Coup #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar (personal communication, February 10, 2021). Apart from celebrities, famous people in other occupations were also tagged with the hashtag, such as Joe Biden (the president of the United States): "Join me in petitioning President Biden to impose sanctions on #Myanmar army after its coup and jailing of civilian government and civil society leaders. @rohingya\_icr @genocideno #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar #CivilDisobedienceMovement #2121Generation" (personal communication, February 9, 2021); and Dominic Raab (lord high chancellor of Great Britain): "@DominicRaab #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar #HumanRightsViolationMyanmar Situation in Myanmar is critical, Myanmar need strong support from UK urgently. School teachers attacked by Myanmar police, one of them broke her hand" (personal communication, February 20, 2021).

This strategy seems successful because it helps disseminate information and facilitates conversations regarding the situation in Myanmar with an international audience, even when the junta has shut down the Internet (Anonymous Burmese activist, personal communication, June 6, 2023). It also significantly raises global awareness of the crisis in Myanmar and promotes transnational collaboration with foreign activists. An example of this is the #MilkTeaAlliance Friends of Myanmar, a collaboration between Burmese and other ethnic activists with other Asian activists (Anonymous Burmese, personal communication, June 6, 2023). This platform has become a space where Burmese and other ethnic activists interact with foreign activists, creating collaborative campaigns and disseminating information to the global community via #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar.

### ***Mobilization***

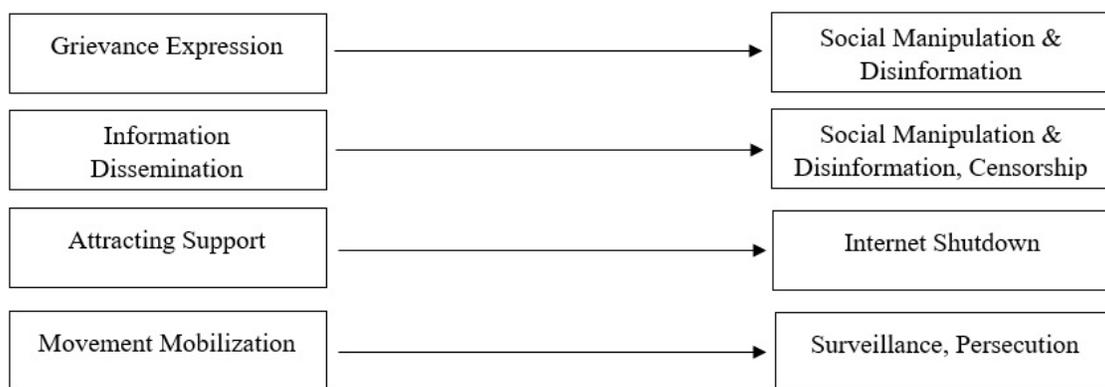
Only 8% of the data set that includes the hashtag falls under the mobilization narrative. These tweets usually provide information about police and army locations and introduce strategies that protesters should apply to oppose the authorities. Many tweets also responded to the Civil Disobedience Movement, which started after the coup, by discussing how to initiate and participate in this movement. Furthermore, this narrative is used to suggest protest tactics that help protesters protect their identity from the military government. This significantly informs protesters on how to combat state repression in both the digital and offline spheres. For example, a Twitter user tweeted, "At this point in #Myanmar, they're wearing masks rather to protect their identities from 'social punishment' than from COVID. @SpecialCouncil #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar #Mar8Coup" (personal communication, March 8, 2021). Protecting their identity is necessary for demonstrators, especially in a nondemocratic environment. However, this protest strategy is not new in the region since it had previously been applied by the movement in Hong Kong ("Hong Kong," 2019). One factor that can help explain this phenomenon is the Hong Kong protest tactic manual book, which was translated into the Burmese language and went viral on social media (Hui, 2021).

The tweets in the mobilization category, on the one hand, represent the circulation of protest knowledge among the protesters. On the other hand, they reflect the power of social media as a platform

that helps transmit protest tactics from one country to another and connects activists located in different places. This indicates the success, to a certain degree, of hashtag narratives in disseminating information and attracting international support as many foreigners became more concerned about Myanmar's issues and decided to support the anti-coup movement. It also demonstrates the cross-national collaboration between Burmese and other ethnic activists with foreigners, a collaboration that has been nurtured since the reformation period and greatly expanded after the coup through various frameworks, such as the Milk Tea Alliance (Anonymous Burmese activist, personal communication, June 1, 2023). This transnational collaboration has facilitated Burmese and other ethnic group activists in learning the experience of activists in Hong Kong, Thailand, and beyond, particularly in combating state surveillance and persecution, and sharing it via the hashtag.

In this sense, the #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar campaign has actively engaged in a wide range of digital movement activities and struggles against digital repression by the state. Initially, the hashtag's meaning was introduced to counter the official narrative and convey to the world that the situation in Myanmar was not as stable and peaceful as the military claimed but rather that something was amiss. However, its flexible sentence structure, not attached to one specific event or person, makes the hashtag applicable to various narrative forms, allowing it to confront several forms of state repression.

The hashtag's four major narratives function as a "counter-narrative" (Al-Ani et al., 2012) to struggle against repression (Figure 2). Although the struggles are not entirely exclusive of each other, each narrative is categorized based on the aspect of digital repression it predominantly focuses on. The grievance expression narrative challenges social manipulation and disinformation. The information dissemination narrative counters censorship, social manipulation, and disinformation by the military junta. Attracting support, especially from the international community, helps keep the conversation about the Myanmar issue active on social media even when the military government has shut down the Internet. Finally, the movement mobilization narrative helps protesters and online users find ways to protect their identities from state surveillance and persecution.



**Figure 2. The function of different narratives in #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar.**

The narrative in the media space reflects the reality and impacts the work of activists in the postcoup environment in several ways. For instance, attracting foreign support and some aspects of the grievance expression narrative illustrate the competition between the military junta and the resistance group for gaining international support as well as the disappointment among activists regarding the lack of concrete support from foreign governments and international organizations. The mobilization narrative represents interactions and knowledge exchanges among Burmese, other ethnic groups, and foreign activists that have greatly expanded and intensified. Furthermore, its inclusion of the other ethnic groups in the hashtag narrative, mainly the grievance expression one, shows the development and dynamics of interethnic relations after the military coup.

Digital repression has intensified since the military coup, compelling activists to navigate ways to fight against the state and its practices of authoritarian governance by creating and adopting new approaches to resistance. Honari (2018) argued that multiple resistance strategies could be adopted when activists experience state repression. This holds true in the case of Myanmar, where activists have adopted several SMART revolution strategies to cope with digital repression by the state, including the usage of Twitter, and #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar. Thus, the adaptation of the hashtag against digital repression is a "natural response" in the cat-and-mouse game between the state and opposition groups. The dominant narrative within the hashtag may evolve in the future as the state changes its repression tactics, prompting activists to develop new strategies and narratives in response.

### **Conclusions**

The #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar campaign exploded on Myanmar's social media after the military coup as part of the SMART revolution and became a space to express grievances and connect individuals who rarely, or never, interact in everyday life. As Akyel (2014, p. 1104, as cited in Clark, 2016, p. 796) stated, the hashtag is "always already incomplete . . . a rhizomatic form that connects diverse texts, images, and videos." This study argues that the #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar campaign can be grouped into four distinct narrative forms: Grievance expression, information dissemination, attracting support, and movement mobilization, in which each narrative fulfills different functions within the context of the struggle against the regime's repression. Grievance expression is the method that local activists have used to oppose misinformation and social manipulation by the military junta and pro-military social media accounts. Information dissemination helps people to correct misinformation posted and receive information that has been censored by the state. Discussions of the political crisis, despite the Internet shutdowns, are still active online due to the attracting support narrative, which helps the protestors appeal for assistance from activists in foreign countries. Last but not least, the movement mobilization narrative assists the demonstrators in avoiding state surveillance and persecution.

At the same time, the hashtag reflects the information exchange among locals from different areas and the process of human interaction through digital media. The hashtag narrative not only creates a space for individuals to express their feelings regarding the political situation but also links the different narratives together and presents various individuals' interpretations of political phenomena in Myanmar. In the end, the hashtag successfully fulfills its original agenda, which is tackling the digital repression of the state and

articulating the political situation on an online platform to inform the international community and provide an understanding of what is currently occurring in Myanmar.

This article only analyzes the contribution of #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar, but there are other anti-digital repression campaigns conducted by local activists that have not yet been explored in the study. Further research can also employ a quantitative method to analyze larger data sizes. Moreover, there are several limitations in researching social media in Myanmar currently: For example, visiting the country is almost impossible, the government constantly blacks out Internet connections, many rules and regulations still prohibit access to online information, and civilians primarily use VPNs when discussing politics. In addition, conducting ethnographic research with activists and protesters might provide a better understanding of their motivations and how hashtags function in the movement. In other words, if the research is conducted when the situation in Myanmar is normal and accessible, the study might be able to provide a more profound and nuanced analysis.

In the age of digitalization, social media have become a new political tool for activists to challenge authorities and negotiate with them, and vice versa. However, the case study of #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar has extended the literature on digital activism and social movement studies in several ways. First, it illustrates a complex relationship in the digital sphere where the state and opposition groups interact and compete with each other. It also demonstrates that the development of narrative and function on social media is relational rather than one-sided, with complete dominance. Second, the hashtag campaign reflects the intricate relationship between offline and online factors in digital campaigns. It can be observed that the evolution of the hashtag narrative is not only influenced by state repression on social media but also by repression on the ground. Third, it urges us to reconsider the influence of international movements on domestic campaigns as the hashtag itself is foreign-born and serves as a channel for interaction between domestic and foreign activists.

It would be interesting to see whether, in the long term, hashtags can successfully combat the digital repression perpetrated by the state and the lessons that activists from other countries can learn from it. Nevertheless, the hashtag highlights the importance of social media as part of everyday practices in contemporary society and as a new research method that can help understand the sociopolitical dynamics not only in Myanmar but also in other places around the world, following the proliferation of smartphones and the Internet and the rise of digital repression by the state.

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