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Angry Posts: Myanmar's Anti-Military Rhetoric on the Internet

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Since the military regime overthrew the democratically elected government in 2021, the world has raised serious concerns about human rights violations in Myanmar. In addition to international efforts calling on the military regime to cease violence, local pro-democracy activists have also undertaken various discursive strategies to mobilize civic action on social media. These online narratives are characterized by hate speech, mockery, and threatening remarks directed at individual soldiers rather than directly challenging the military regime. This article connects the concepts of affective publics with contentious repertoires and connective action, highlighting the dynamics of the affective turn in Myanmar's pro-democracy rhetoric—manifested in how Burmese citizens use social media to create networked publics and protest communities. It demonstrates the normative role of sentiments, such as anger, in mobilizing support and shows how such affective publics share certain characteristics with digital populism, which may evolve into radicalized narratives that morally condemn "evil" soldiers.

Keywords: affective publics, connective action, contentious repertoire, protest community, pro-democracy rhetoric, everyday justice, Myanmar, military regime, digital activism

On February 1, 2021, State Counselor of Myanmar Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint were detained at gunpoint by armed soldiers during a military coup initiated by Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing (Thein-Lemelson, 2021). The State Administration Council (SAC), which took office after the coup, was quickly met with mass street protests and civil disobedience movements, reflecting a strategy of nonviolent, leaderless resistance (David et al., 2022; Jordt et al., 2021). The coup transformed Myanmar's sociopolitical landscape and marked the beginning of resistance campaigns against military junta rule, collectively known as the Spring Revolution (Vrieze, 2023). It has garnered global attention and impacted the dynamics of transnational activism and collective action in the region.

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Resistance in Myanmar, however, did not change the military regime. Instead, more extensive repression was implemented in both real-life and digital spheres, with the SAC employing various direct and indirect strategies to suppress growing revolutionary campaigns across the country. The suppressive strategies include arresting and attacking (online) dissidents, shutting down communication channels—the Internet and mobile phone networks—amending the broadcasting law to censor social media platforms, and disseminating pro-SAC propaganda and disinformation, such as framing protesters as "terrorists" and "rioters" (Phattharathanasut, 2024; Ryan & Tran, 2024). Research has shown how Facebook is abused and weaponized by the military to deliver propaganda, surveil citizens, spread fear, and foment violence in Myanmar (Rio, 2020). The state's active suppression of dissent ranges from harassment and scapegoating to digital censorship (Passeri, 2019).

Authorities' control of social media led pro-democracy activists to adopt various approaches to circumvent censorship, such as using virtual private networks (VPNs), concealing IP addresses, enabling multifactor authentication for social media accounts, and migrating to encrypted messaging apps like Signal (Phattharathanasut, 2024). Egreteau (2023) adopts Charles Tilly's (2008) concept of contentious repertoire and examines how anti-coup protesters have mobilized into contentious collective action, such as call-and-response chants and armed resistance. The resistance forces have established democratic local governance structures, including schools, hospitals, and administrative offices across Myanmar (Wilson, 2024). Activists, students, and monks in Myanmar have adopted different strategies to continue resisting the military government while minimizing risk, such as university boycotts, hunger strikes, silent strikes, etc. (Chiu, 2025; Egreteau, 2025; Prasse-Freeman, 2023). Some individuals and groups overseas continuously draw global attention to Myanmar by disseminating information and mobilizing global support, for example, through the hashtag #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar on X/Twitter (Phattharathanasut, 2024).

Research on Myanmar's coup and anti-coup strategies has considered different digital tactics. On one hand, the military regime has adopted digital tools to crush dissent, including trolls and "keyboard armies," to censor citizens, promote government propaganda, spread fear, and harass political opponents (Passeri, 2019; Rio, 2020). On the other hand, protesters employ various creative tactics in hybrid (digital and physical) everyday spaces (Yee et al., 2026), ranging from blogging to discuss politics (Aung et al., 2019) to establishing independent media outlets (Htwe, 2025), highlighting the continued contestation surrounding online and hybrid pro-democracy activism against state digital abuse and censorship in the post-coup era (Phattharathanasut, 2024; Ryan & Tran, 2024; Zreik, 2025).

Although acknowledging the power of morality in social movements (Sevelsted & Toubøl, 2023), little research has examined the normative meanings of sentiments like anger in anti-military online narratives. This could be because they are emotional, personal, and individually targeted without specifying what actions need to be taken. They are more about expressing one's sentiments—specifically anger and hatred—and mocking the misfortune of individual soldiers. Drawing on Tilly's (2008) concept of contentious repertoire, which suggests that contentious performances can be adapted to local or issue-specific needs and sociopolitical contexts, we argue that angry online posts embody contention and become an important mobilization strategy as they resonate with Burmese citizens. Normatively, they justify hatred by highlighting the immorality of SAC soldiers and invoking the grassroots idea of everyday justice (Kyed, 2021)

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in Burmese society to hold soldiers accountable for human rights violations (and therefore "deserve" to be punished). In an authoritarian context, it is important to understand how these new and diverse pro-democracy rhetorics serve as a contentious repertoire and what kinds of affective publics and protest communities emerge on social media that become alternative protest tactics (Yee et al., 2026).

Theoretical Framework: Affective Publics as Contentious Repertoires

The evolution of contentious repertoires and the balance between ritual and flexibility have been prominent topics of inquiry in the study of social movements and contentious politics (Tilly, 2008). For example, scholars (Li & Whitworth, 2025) compare contentious performances and similar ways diverse actors co-created protest spaces on walls in Hong Kong and other countries, including Lebanon, Iraq, and Taiwan. Such contentious performances demonstrate considerable creativity and innovation in protest action and discourse (Johnston, 2016; Tilly, 2008), serving the functions of meaning making and boundary making.

Associated with contentious repertoire is how activists frame the issues at stake to persuade and attract public support. Framing denotes an "active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614). It creates a narrative that helps people give meaning to their experiences, providing the rationale for action and its practicability and legitimacy (della Porta & Diani, 2006). The framing processes also define and reinforce the boundaries between "us" and "them" (Tilly, 2003, p. 139).

Discursive diversity, framing, and creativity are further manifested in the online sphere. Papacharissi (2016) claims that social media allows crowds to be rendered into publics—networked publics that want to tell their stories collaboratively and on their own terms (p. 308). Papacharissi (2015) then uses the term "affective publics" to illuminate "networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment" (p. 125). For Papacharissi (2015), sentiments drive Internet engagement, explaining the shift from a passive audience to an active audience in online conversations. Linking affective publics to contentious politics, the concept of affective publics can be examined alongside Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) connective action. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) noted that, in the digital era, there is a distinction between "connective" action on social media platforms and traditional "collective" in-person activism. One key difference is that connective action is characterized by individualized and personalized schemes, framings, and action strategies. These individualized frames, such as memes and hashtags, have become important information dissemination tools for building "imagined solidarity" (Stewart & Schultze, 2019), circulating and mobilizing grassroots action more efficiently than traditional means (Harbo, 2022).

Consistent with the reduced emphasis on "collective" action and identity, Papacharissi (2015, 2016) examines how networked publics are mobilized and connected through expressions of sentiment, including storytelling and counter-storytelling. In her words, "affective publics support connective yet not necessarily collective action" (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 314). Specifically, individual viewpoints are interconnected, helping online users feel more engaged in political conversations. While they may benefit the overall outcomes of social movements, they do not necessarily coalesce into collective narratives. The fundamental characteristics of affective publics are affective statements of opinion and sentiments that connect and

diversify expression. Studies have also found that negative sentiments, such as fear, anger, and resentment, are effective in mobilizing online political participation (Gerbaudo et al., 2023; Young, 2023). In an authoritarian context like Myanmar, affective publics can counter-frame, engage in counter-storytelling, and disrupt dominant political narratives by presenting underrepresented viewpoints (Papacharissi, 2016; Walpersberger & Gretzel, 2024).

Meanwhile, in media studies and communication, scholars have highlighted that diverse views on social media do not guarantee a healthier digital public sphere (Parnes, 2016). There is growing concern about how misinformation, disinformation, and affective polarization undermine deliberative democracy (McKay & Tenove, 2021; Serrano-Puche, 2021). Bratich (2020), for example, proposes "network populism" to explain how contemporary populist movements operate and emerge through network structures. Bratich (2020) views populism as a discursive object and signifier in a cultural and political war. As sentiments are central to affective publics, there are risks of "cyber-demagoguery"—manipulating public opinions and inciting division through emotionally charged rhetoric (Bratich, 2020), "affective binary politics"—creating emotional divisions between political groups that increase social distance, distrust, and negative attitudes toward those with different political views (Lim, 2020, pp. 195–196), and "populist communication"—using emotionally charged narratives and assigning emotionalized blame (Block & Negrine, 2017; Hameleers et al., 2017). Other scholars note that digital activism in Southeast Asia could aid the spread of disinformation, hatred, and violence, potentially fostering "digital populism" that threatens democracy and human rights (Estella, 2021; Lim, 2023).

The dilemma of populist communication raises the classic debate over whether a noble end (e.g., pro-democracy) can justify violent means or undermine public support for protests (Feinberg et al., 2020; Greenwood-Reeves, 2022). Reflecting on the potential limits of connective action and affective publics, other research also highlights several related challenges. At the macro level, digital repression, surveillance, and censorship are prevalent (Feldstein, 2021; Gohdes, 2024). At the societal and individual level, the scope and sustainability of affective publics can be undermined by digital disengagement (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019), negative emotional culture (Shahin & Ng, 2022), short-term loyalties and reduced stability in political socialization (Couldry, 2015), public apathy and the gap between online and offline action (Yetano & Royo, 2017), among others.

This article connects affective publics with contentious repertoires and connective action, examining the normative meanings of sentiments and how protesters use sentiments—especially anger, mockery, and hatred—as connective forces in online mobilization to amplify affect, foster a protest community, and create "imagined" solidarity, as seen in Myanmar's online discursive narratives (i.e., angry posts). Concerning whether angry posts evolve into digital populism and threaten democracy (Estella, 2021; Lim, 2023), this article acknowledges that, as a form of political participation and mobilization, Facebook posts expressing hatred can escalate into "violent" behaviors like doxing, defamation, hate speech, or trolling for social justice. In this sense, angry posts could be considered a form of digital populism, as they both employ justice frames—holding (evil) elites accountable for their (violent) actions against (innocent) people—and may include verbal violence. However, the normative meanings of sentiments and the "deservingness" of soldiers being punished add a layer of complexity to populism. Angry posts differ from cyber-demagoguery or right-wing populism, which focus solely on targeting the (evil) elites. Instead, they criticize soldiers who

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are considered proxies of the military regime. They are not identical to digital populism, which focuses on how social media has become a political tool for disseminating fake news, misinformation, trolling, and hate speech (Estella, 2021; Lim, 2023). Populists' digital strategies allow them to gain support and respond promptly to events without pausing to verify the information provided (Kim, 2015). The case of angry posts in Myanmar, however, involves Burmese citizens' narrative agency. We argue that the normative meanings of sentiments like anger and hatred not only mobilize public support (Sevelsted & Toubøl, 2023) and challenge social manipulation and disinformation by the junta (Phattharathanasut, 2024) but also respond to the military regime's increasing control of the Internet. Under a suppressive environment, Burmese citizens have shifted the discursive battleground to everyday digital spaces, delegitimizing the military regime by foregrounding sentiments like anger and hatred as alternative protest tactics (Yee et al., 2026).

Data and Methods

We first selected 20 key pro-democracy activists (including individual and group pages) in Myanmar whose accounts have at least 100,000 followers on Facebook. We acknowledge that it may be hard to fully distinguish between activists and ordinary people in the context of Myanmar, as both shared anti-military comments and mobilizing posts. We chose Facebook as the main site because its content is often cross-posted on other social media platforms, such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and Telegram. Moreover, Facebook is arguably the main outlet through which Burmese people receive and disseminate information and engage in digital mobilization (Lukito et al., 2024). Its share of social media traffic was significantly higher than that of the next two largest rival platforms, X/Twitter and VK, which had less than 2% (Tønnesson et al., 2022). Because of increasing pressure from local civil society, Facebook took down military-linked pages and accounts within weeks of the coup (Ryan & Tran, 2024), making the accounts we examined more "authentic" as they were unlikely to be military-linked accounts posing as pro-democracy.

We collected Burmese-language posts mentioning "coup," "military," "soldier," "police," "resistance," "revolution," "democracy," "fight," and "mobilization" from the identified groups using CrowdTangle, a social media monitoring platform owned by Meta. The second author of this article, a Burmese native speaker, was responsible for identifying the most relevant posts and images. Based on purposive sampling, we selected 50 posts between 2023 and 2024 for analysis. We applied inductive, thematic coding (Charmaz, 2006) to analyze data. The number of examined posts may raise concerns about representativeness across phases of the conflict. To address this issue, we also double-checked other social media platforms (e.g., X/Twitter) to ensure similar content appeared across different platforms.

Our coding categories include mobilization strategies, framings (diagnostic, prognostic, boundary, and mobilizing; see Benford & Snow, 2000), and sentiments, alongside words and slogans identified from the selected posts/images. For data analysis, we took the following steps: (1) identifying "specific contents" or "topics/themes of discourse" about mobilization; (2) examining the "discursive strategies" used; and (3) analyzing "context-dependent linguistic realisations" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 93). To maximize the validity of coding categories and intercoder reliability, we adopted an iterative process, continuously coding posts and holding monthly discussions to assess how well existing categories captured post content. The first author also used AI translation to verify the meanings of selected posts and ensure that slogans appearing in images are accurately interpreted.

Ethics Statement

Given the sensitive nature of content targeting individual soldiers and civilians, we followed the social media research protocol ("Using Data from the Internet and Social Media in Research: Ethics & Consent"; LSE, 2026), anonymizing post authors and ensuring no information in this article revealed their identities.

Findings

Common themes in our data set include sharing news about civil disobedience movements and military arrests of protesters; highlighting people's suffering and struggles under the military regime; mobilizing slogans such as "keep the faith" or "we still believe," promoting human rights; expressing frustration, helplessness, and sadness; and mocking the military and its soldiers. Among the posts we collected, mockery and targeting soldiers stood out. Although presented in various ways—some with graphics and others with metaphors—these posts were mostly filled with affective content and sentiments of anger and hatred (> 80% in our data set). Furthermore, soldiers were conflated with the military regime and became discursive targets. In this section, we identify three discursive strategies from the coding process: a mixture of passive and active sentiments, radicalized narratives mocking individual soldiers and often accompanied by hatred, and the pursuit of everyday justice when targeting soldiers.

Passive While Active

Analysis of the identified posts and images, to our surprise, shows that most (> 90% in our data set) provided little information on "how to" strategically challenge the military regime. This shows that diverse digital strategies may not be able to transcend the high participation costs of promoting democratic change or challenging the military regime. In an authoritarian regime like Myanmar, expressing dissent and resistance through official channels is difficult because of participation costs (Zreik, 2025). To circumvent the constraints of political structure, discursive strategies on Facebook and X/Twitter tend to "passively" criticize rather than "actively" challenge the regime. One example is the risk of abduction and indiscriminate arrest of those suspected of being anti-military since the enactment of the Conscription Law in February 2024, placing enormous pressure on young people struggling to survive under the regime (Kyaw, 2020). Using Hirschmann's (1970) exit-voice-loyalty model of dissatisfaction, rather than mobilizing Burmese civilians to challenge the regime through protests or resist conscription, one option is the "exit" strategy—leaving the country, if possible, by pursuing further education or finding overseas employment. In a diaspora setting, overseas Burmese migrants continue practicing long-distance activism and diaspora diplomacy by lobbying foreign governments and running advocacy campaigns from a distance (Bu & Matelski, 2025; Ho & McConnell, 2022).

Advocating from overseas is not necessarily passive. Activists often urge foreign governments to impose political or economic sanctions against Myanmar's regime, such as restricting the military's access to equipment, fuel, technology, and funds (Rochat & Tsouloufas, 2024). On October 31, 2023, the United States, United Kingdom, and Canadian governments imposed further coordinated sanctions on individuals

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and entities linked to Myanmar's military regime; additional legal and diplomatic measures also targeted the military and its leaders. There are also posts (approximately 26% in our data set) asking the public to "keep believing" and "continue resisting."

The "passive" element often comes with frustration stemming from the low chance of challenging the regime and the high risk of arrest. Since the coup, the junta authorities have arbitrarily arrested more than 16,000 pro-democracy supporters (Pertiwi, 2025). Rather than resorting to digital activism that directly challenges the regime, social media mobilization and public discourse focus on anti-military messaging, highlighting human rights violations and targeting individual soldiers with mockery, threats, and hatred. These online narratives, however, sometimes become radicalized and connotate patriarchal values. For example, some set out to decrease the social recognition and legitimacy of the soldiers (i.e., to degrade them from the established social and gendered hierarchy), whereas others include mockery and threatening remarks to mobilize the public's anti-military emotions. In addition to framing and mobilizing functions, Burmese activists' discursive strategies also manifest the grassroots definition and pursuit of "everyday justice" (Kyed, 2021) in Burmese society. Everyday justice refers to the informal mechanisms people use to achieve resolution or redress when formal systems fail. In the angry posts, we can also see what justice means to Burmese citizens, as well as how they justify holding soldiers accountable for their actions.

Myanmar's pro-democracy rhetoric on social media illustrates the complex role of passive participants in mobilizing public sentiment online, particularly under government suppression of digital activism (Zreik, 2025). Angry posts, therefore, have become a more realistic form of protest—people can remain flexible and anonymous while engaging in protest. Nevertheless, such a "passive" element connotes some positive meanings. While using the diagnostic framing strategy (Benford & Snow, 2000) to blame the military regime for Myanmar's humanitarian crisis, there are other motivational framing strategies, including presenting the image of stepping on the soldier's hat with slogans such as "Joining the resistance or die for the notorious military!" "Persuading your families/friends to leave the military!" and a call for actions among diasporic Burmese communities: "Continue resistance from overseas!" (personal communication, March 18, 2024). On the other hand, rather than solely blaming the soldiers, some posts call for individual soldiers to leave the army and join the civil disobedience movement alongside many civil servants who refuse to work under the military (Kyed & Lynn, 2024).

Connecting digital activism with diaspora activism, activists use digital platforms to highlight the ongoing struggle for democracy and human rights and to attract support from international organizations, foreign governments, and nongovernmental organizations. Meanwhile, youth activism led by students and Generation Z protesters has adopted creative forms of resistance, including establishing independent media outlets, actively participating in the civil disobedience movement, and leading nonviolent demonstrations (Chambers & Dhu Da, 2024; Htwe, 2025). The development and/or use of new social media platforms free from government censorship and the use of new apps such as Signal to store data on social media sites remain effective in establishing connective democracy and organizing civic movements in Myanmar.

Considering the political opportunity structure, although protesters have adopted diverse tactics to keep movement momentum, restricted Internet access and the government's blocking of VPNs and Facebook have created a chilling effect and substantially reduced public engagement on social media

(Human Rights Myanmar, 2024). The junta resurrected the cybersecurity law to increase its ability to control the flow of information through Internet provider companies and to illegalize VPNs (Strangio, 2022). Internet shutdowns have also been frequently imposed to inhibit the spread of anti-governmental information through social media and other Internet-based communication channels (Kim & Kim, 2025; Phattharathanasut, 2024). Official restrictions and censorship made pro-democracy rhetoric on social media less "direct" in organizing protests. Instead, posts expressing individuals' sentiments helped form affective publics, a protest community, and a connective action characterized by radicalized narratives, mockery, and hatred.

Radicalized Narratives: Mocking Soldiers With Hatred and Justifying It

Myanmar is a patriarchal society where men's status is perceived to be higher than women's (Jefferson & Myanmar Research Team, 2024). Burmese males are raised to believe that they possess an innate spiritual superiority over women. This belief despises women's bodies as impure, such that even their clothing is thought to weaken men's masculine power. Following the coup, women weaponized this perception by hanging their undergarments along defense lines to weaken the masculinity of the military (Kyi, 2025). A notable example is the Longyi Revolution during Myanmar's Spring Revolution, with its slogan "Our Longyi, Our Flag, Our Victory" (Chambers, 2023). This movement not only fought for democracy and condemned the military coup but also symbolized resistance to the patriarchal military system, advocating for gender equality. Women's bodies were, therefore, both material objects and tools of resistance and protest (Mra & Hedström, 2024).

The deep-rooted social values and gendered system mean that undermining masculinity can become both a symbolic and an effective way to challenge the legitimacy of (mostly male) soldiers in Burmese society. Presenting male soldiers wearing women's clothing (e.g., longyi) or claiming that soldiers should wear longyi is a common tactic in the online posts we examined. Wearing a woman's longyi symbolizes that a soldier no longer deserves to wear "men's clothing," implying a loss of social status, masculinity, and authority. Figure 1 below illustrates sample comments from a post suggesting that the junta would need to wear women's clothing to win the war against revolutionary forces. Most comments under the post supported the claim, including "He (the junta chief) would wear whatever that would make him a president!"; "He wore a longyi before, he would wear a bra and htaingmathein (a traditional longyi)"; and "They are following the astrologers' ideas, they would wear women's clothing or put them on their heads" (personal communication, April 3, 2024).

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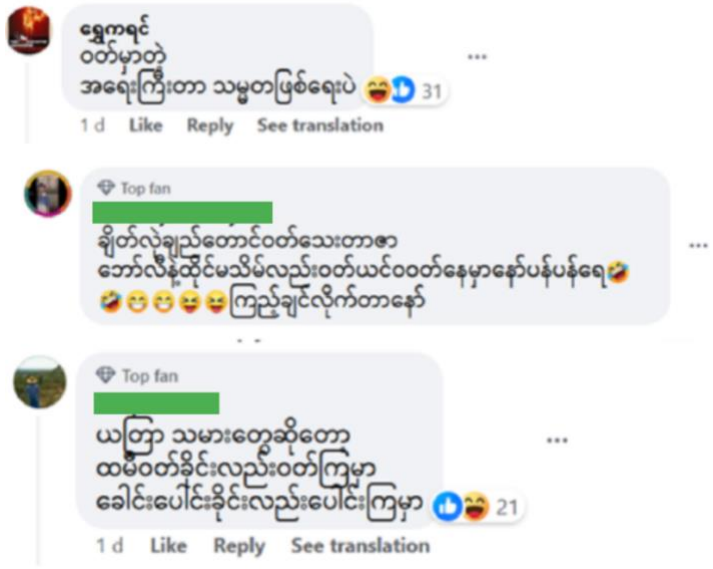

Figure 1. Sample comments on junta leaders wearing longyi (personal communication, April 3, 2024).

Another post (see Figure 2) reveals similar patriarchal attitudes that express contempt for women. It is a post from a member of the revolutionary force. The post reads, "Don't try to compete with us. You (junta's soldiers) are just wasting time and burning yourself out. Your intelligence is no better than women's, you should just wear a longyi." Other similar comments under video clips also state, "Just put on a longyi, you low-lives!" and "The soldier acts like a woman and so girly" (personal communication, February 25, 2024).

Figure 2. A post mocking the junta soldiers (personal communication, March 29, 2024).

In addition to posting mocking memes to undermine soldiers' social recognition and legitimacy, activists employed more extreme narratives to threaten them. For example, one post (see Figure 3 below) stated, "Do you know what would be a mistress of a soldier? Two pieces" (personal communication, January 8, 2024). The post refers to a criminal case in which a military doctor killed his wife and dismembered her. The quote was widely shared with different photos and triggered many comments mocking the murder (up to 38K comments). It then evolved to other posts sharing likely scenarios for women who marry soldiers, though sometimes in a sarcastic manner. One comment mentioned, for example:

> A soldier's wife in Naypyidaw was murdered and dismembered. Similarly, in Laukkaing, a wife of a soldier from Light Infantry Battalion 322 was abandoned by her own husband. The so-called great Tatmadaw soldiers—how "manly" they are. The women who have such "wonderful husbands" like them must be truly blessed! 😂. (personal communication, January 12, 2024)

Figure 3. A more extreme narrative. Photo Caption: Colonel Zayar Lin, an obstetrician-gynaecologist at the No. 2 Military Obstetrics and Gynecology and Children's Hospital in Nay Pyi Taw, killed his wife and dumped her body (personal communication, December 28, 2023).

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Beyond targeting individual soldiers, moral criticism in these online posts also extended to soldiers' families. For example, there are narratives such as "His daughter will be ashamed of his obnoxious low-life mindset," and "I'm ashamed on behalf of his daughter!" (personal communication, January 2, 2024). This is similar to other contexts, where, in response to police brutality, protesters extend "punishment" to policemen's wives and children by disclosing their names, phone numbers, home addresses, social media accounts, schools they attend, etc. (Li & Whitworth, 2024).

These radicalized narratives and hatred sentiments also extend to posts "celebrating" soldiers' deaths or injuries in the battle. For example, under one of Khit Thit Media's posts on a senior military officer who was killed (see Figure 4 below), many comments included thumbs up, smiley faces, clapping emojis, and cheerful comments like, "Very happy and satisfied!" "What a great news!" "I like it!" "This is so exciting!" and "May the totalitarian terrorists suffer!" among others (personal communication, May 20, 2024).

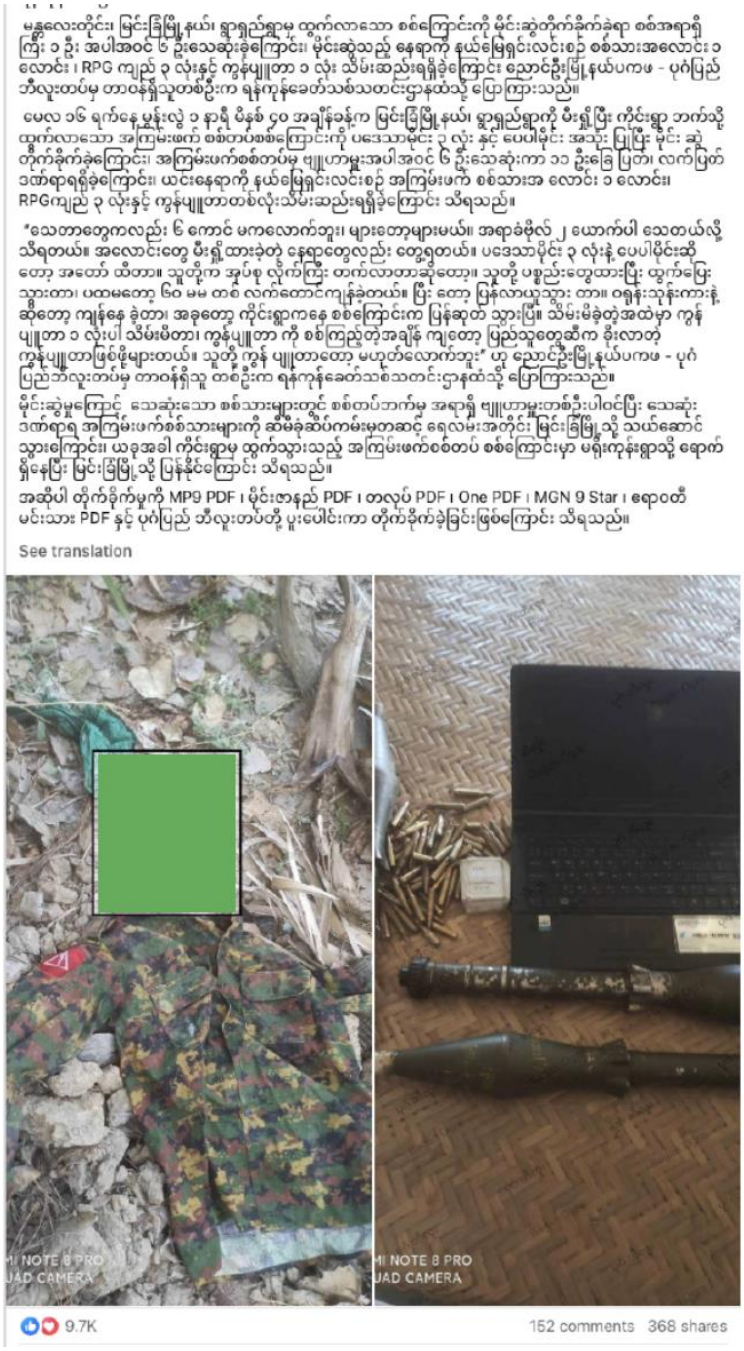

Figure 4. News report on a military officer killed. Caption: In Myin Chan, six people, including a senior military officer in charge of mine-clearing operations, were killed (personal communication, May 19, 2024).

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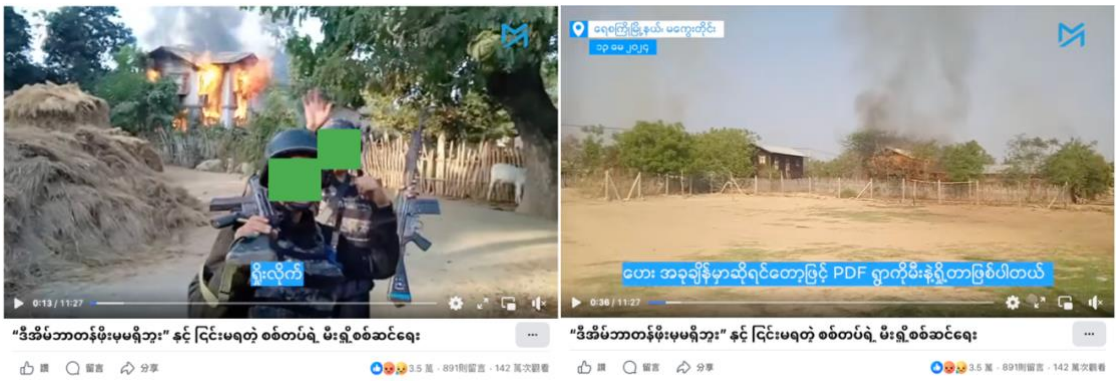
When Hannah Arendt (1964) wrote about the banality of evil, she referred to the absence of independent thinking and the unreflective execution of orders that enable evil. Angry posts, however, convey moral condemnation by emphasizing that Tatmadaw soldiers are not simply following orders and do not lack conscientious thinking. In other words, they are not "innocent." In this regard, soldiers are portrayed as proxies of the evil regime and held responsible for their actions, evidenced by activists' moral condemnations of soldiers who burned civilian villages, stole property, and celebrated vandalism while singing songs. In a video entitled "This House is Worthless" (see Figures 5 and 6 below, personal communication, July 27, 2024), for example, activists documented and shared video evidence proving that the crimes were committed by military (SAC) troops and soldiers. As armed resistance spread across the country, the SAC increasingly adopted a scorched-earth strategy, launching village-by-village military operations and burning down entire communities with extreme brutality. The strategy was to create a chilling effect among citizens who supported the People's Defence Force (PDF)—the armed wing of the National Unity Government (NUG) formed in May 2021 to resist the military junta (SAC). The video evidence showed military forces setting fire to villages in Salingyi Township, Sagaing Region, and Ye Sa Kyaw Township, Magway Region. In this video, SAC soldiers were celebrating vandalism, yelling, "Check out your PDF houses, have a look! We are burning the PDF villages! We are great Tatmadaw soldiers! These villages are all burned down!" "F**king PDF, f**king citizens. You support PDF, come out if you dare! Come out if you wanna die!" "Destroy it! Damn it! Destroy it all! Shoot, shoot!" and "Break that door, can we just burn down? Yes, we will. We can take anything we want" (personal communication, July 27, 2024). In the latter part of the video, several soldiers were singing a Burmese song, the lyrics of which were, "Gathered together around the bonfire, joyfully with friends and companions" (personal communication, July 27, 2024). Such behaviors reinforced the public's belief that individual soldiers were inherently evil and merely manifestations of the military regime.



Figures 5 and 6. Soldiers burned down PDF villages while celebrating (personal communication, July 27, 2024).

However, hatred may blur the real source of the humanity crisis in Myanmar, which is the military regime, rather than the individual soldiers who implement the order. From the digital populism perspective, although mobilizing the public's hatred toward individual soldiers is effective, it may not necessarily translate into mistrust of the government.

The Facebook posts we examined show that targeting and mocking individual soldiers (rather than the system) extends across all aspects of their daily lives, from personal affairs (e.g., marriage) to petty misbehaviors. Beyond expressing frustrations or serving as a form of civic resistance, these negative portrayals also reinforce deep-rooted patriarchal values that may contradict efforts to end gender-based violence and gender inequality—key aims of the pro-democracy movement.

One thing that should be noted is that these hateful sentiments are not just expressions of frustration after realizing the difficulty of directly challenging the regime. Many of them witnessed and suffered from the junta's brutality during the early days of anti-coup protests, in detention centers, and in the ongoing conflict (including rape, brutal killings, and ongoing air strikes). Thousands lost family members and friends. For them, the soldiers represent the evil regime and are not simply performing the banality of evil, as Arendt (1964) claims. They should be held accountable for violating human rights.

Grassroots Definition and Pursuit of "Everyday Justice" in Myanmar

Studies have discussed different sources and pathways to radicalization (Rothman, 2018; Snow & Cross, 2011). Online posts and hateful sentiments in Myanmar's digital activism reveal a tendency toward radicalism in an authoritarian context, targeting soldiers as proxies of the regime. These radicalized narratives contain moral charges, highlighting soldiers' accountability for what they have done. They also reflect a grassroots definition and pursuit of "justice" in Burmese society—an eye for an eye—aimed at achieving immediate punitive "effect" (e.g., naming and shaming) and adopting informal justice-seeking strategies to hold soldiers accountable rather than confronting the regime. This can be seen from comments such as "They are not innocent!"; "Their inhumane actions should be condemned!"; and "They will pay back for what they've done!" (personal communication, July 27, 2024).

"Everyday justice" and associated sentiments like anger or hatred are important in understanding Myanmar's social norms and online mobilization. It may not be surprising that under a military regime with high participation risks and censorship, people tend to mock individual soldiers. Mobilizing public sentiments through an "affective resemblance" (Pajnik & Ribać, 2025), which includes empathy, compassion, anger, and hatred, remains effective in mobilizing collective actions, including negative campaigning (Gerbaudo et al., 2023; Young, 2023). Angry posts in Myanmar expressed sentiments that resonated with Burmese citizens' frustration, strengthening motivation and triggering high-threshold interactions, such as sharing and retweeting. On a moral basis, these sentiments are key to achieving virality in the diffusion of political messages and protests (Gerbaudo et al., 2023; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). The results of these posts, for example, triggered thousands of follow-up comments applauding, mocking, and "celebrating" the murder of individual soldiers. Under a post suggesting crimes against individual soldiers, only one comment condemned it. This raises concerns about the role of online radicalized narratives and hate speech in pro-democracy movements in Myanmar (Htun, 2020; Kyaw, 2020)—whether they may slide into populist dynamics under repression, whether they disguise the real problem of the authoritarian regime amid democratic backsliding, and whether targeting individuals with populist sentiments could produce positive political change for Myanmar's future.

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Conclusion: "Constructive" Affective Publics for the Pro-democracy Movement?

Under Myanmar's repressive political structure, citizens have adopted flexible strategies to continue resisting the regime. In addition to tactics such as university boycotts, hunger strikes, and silent strikes (Chiu, 2025; Egreteau, 2025; Prasse-Freeman, 2023), this article examines how pro-democracy activists in Myanmar use digital platforms to mobilize public sentiment under state repression. Drawing on concepts such as affective publics, contentious repertoire, and connective action, we argue that discursive mobilization—visible in online angry posts—constitutes a more realistic form of protest for navigating a repressive political structure and serves as an important contentious repertoire during Myanmar's humanitarian crisis. These angry posts become individually targeted and employ an "affective resemblance" (Pajnik & Ribać, 2025) to resonate with the Burmese public.

This case study adds theoretically to studies of affective publics under a repressive regime and whether hatred can be understood as an alternative protest tactic (Yee et al., 2026). As Phattharathanasut (2024) noted, the grievance expression narrative challenges social manipulation and disinformation by the junta. The angry posts presented in this article further show Burmese citizens' narrative agency in highlighting the immorality and accountability of soldiers and their grassroots idea of everyday justice.

Unlike studies that highlight that anger-triggering online communications are often associated with right-wing populists on Facebook and negative campaigning (Gerbaudo et al., 2023; Kim, 2015), we argue that the individual sentiments and frames in Myanmar present a unique form of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) and show some differences from the traditional understanding of (digital) populism (Kim, 2015). Although online angry posts also use frames of the (good) people vs. the (evil) political elites and may contain verbal violence, they reflect a more complicated "narrative agency" (Yang, 2016)—normative meanings of everyday justice, holding soldiers accountable for their violent actions, applying patriarchal values to mock soldiers wearing longyi to delegitimize their masculinity, and resorting to radicalism and hate speech to curse or celebrate soldiers' misfortune. In addition to anger-triggering online communication, sentiments like anger also connotate positive meanings in actively highlighting the moral grounds and grassroots idea of justice. However, it is difficult to determine whether angry posts are necessary tactics, contingent responses, or byproducts of authoritarian violence in Myanmar, as they emerged from a specific political opportunity structure following the 2021 military coup and the state's suppression of social media, making them distinct from the populist politics of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership (Garnett, 2023).

By connecting affective publics with contentious repertoire, this article argues that Myanmar's contentious repertoire is characterized by an affective turn, manifested in how people use social media under a repressive regime to create networked publics and protest communities (Papacharissi, 2016), demonstrate local understandings of justice, and develop radicalized narratives in response to official constraints such as the national firewall, censorship, and increasing participation costs. Such an affective protest community can sustain mobilizing energies and fuel discursive strategies into a more diverse format. Furthermore, angry posts in Myanmar equate soldiers to the military regime and highlight the immorality and accountability of soldiers, distinct from Arendt's idea of the banality of evil and digital populism that mostly targets corrupt elites. In the present study, Burmese soldiers are considered proxies of the state, a

discursive object to be held responsible for human rights violations. They are emotionally and morally blamed (Bratich, 2020), seen as despicable "others" (Lim, 2020), and portrayed as disgraceful, untrustworthy, responsible for human rights violations, and unworthy of occupying the top of the social hierarchy in Burmese society (i.e., they can only wear longyi as women).

Research in communication and digital activism has examined protest narratives, forms of radicalism, and their consequences (Lee, 2018; Snow & Cross, 2011). One debate concerns whether radicalism is effective in pressuring institutions and whether sentiments like hatred can mobilize the public (Sevelsted & Toubøl, 2023) or whether it may reduce popular support for social movements (Feinberg et al., 2020). With moral justification, Myanmar's pro-democracy rhetoric on the Internet is efficient for mobilizing sentiments such as hatred and anger to express frustration. In addition to their immediate "punishing effects" on individual soldiers, these radicalized narratives and mobilized sentiments became a distinctive feature of Burmese's contentious repertoire after the coup, potentially fueling collective action. Yet, the question remains whether these narratives are "constructive" for Myanmar's political future. Although online posts do not need to directly confront the regime to be politically meaningful, the sheer volume of anti-soldiers' narratives, hate speech, and patriarchal or threatening remarks may derail and bury the pro-democracy movement and blur focus from the real problems of democratic backsliding and human rights violations. The portrayal of soldiers as part of the evil regime in the angry posts serves to hold human rights violations accountable, regardless of whether responsibility lies with the regime or with individual soldiers.

Furthermore, connecting the emotional tenor of online posts to questions of moral responsibility and legitimacy, these threatening and hostile posts may create an ethical grey zone and undermine the legitimacy of the movement. One key concern following the coup in Myanmar is the exacerbation of gender-based violence (Saltsman, 2023), yet sarcastic posts mocking soldiers wearing longyi may reinforce long-existing gendered stereotypes and patriarchal norms. Once the ethical grounds for such posts are questioned, their use as a protest tactic may be limited, which could negatively influence the legitimacy of movement participants and their claims (Li & Whitworth, 2024), "disconnect" affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015), and undermine the solidarity basis of a protest community through particular expressions of sentiment in angry posts.

Situating this ethical puzzle in the context of global democratic backsliding, we have increasingly witnessed more radicalized narratives in right-wing or left-wing movements targeting individual political leaders or parties. Comparing the sentiments of anger as a communication practice of pro-democratic angry posts and populists' digital strategies, there are more questions worth exploring. Is there an essential difference between pro-democracy rhetoric and populism if the goal is to trigger public sentiments and attract support against the elites? Is it possible to reach the movement's goal and attract the public's attention without mobilizing sentiments of hatred and anger? Is it possible to be emotionally "neutral" when facing an authoritarian regime that has committed inhumane actions, and if so, how? Is there a space for a more "constructive" way of criticism in the pro-democracy movement rhetoric, rather than just structuring around hatred and threat? Or is it effective, in the context of connective action, to focus on sentiments like anger and hatred, especially in authoritarian contexts? These

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questions are important not only for Myanmar's political future but also for other ongoing civil disobedience movements worldwide.

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