

FACEBOOK IN YANGON, MYANMAR

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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Master's thesis

The Department of Social Anthropology

University of Oslo

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Facebook in Yangon, Myanmar

- *An Ethnographic Study*

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Abstract

This thesis is based on six-month ethnographic fieldwork in Yangon, Myanmar conducted in the spring of 2018. Through three different perspectives, I aim at an understanding of how Facebook gained and withholds its position as “The Internet” amongst local users in Yangon. What happens when Facebook is used as the internet, and how does this affect my informants, and how do they interpret it?

Theoretically, the thesis draws on the two main approaches of how to understand the new technology and internet; as a mediator or a facilitator. I explore how digital script can be an obstacle to technological development. Digital encoding systems of Burmese text and its challenges, amongst other issues, discriminate local languages, and how it limits the access to the internet outside of Facebook. Furthermore, in discussing emotion and affect, I explain why my informants could say, “the real feelings is online.” I aim at an understanding of how feelings can be interpreted as a potential emotional compass to navigate the internet. Lastly, I discuss Facebook and performed sociality, and how the three different levels (internationally, nationally, and locally) affect and creates the context, norms, and social frames the local users socialize within.

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Figure I - Map of Yangon. Source: www.mappery.com

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Chapter 1.

“Introduction”

The sun had hit the horizon, and the dim lighting from restaurants surrounded us. Dedan, two other foreign friends and I, were sitting in our favorite bbq-station in 19th street, one of the famous hang-out places in downtown Yangon. It was a calm evening without too many people, so we manage to get one of the larger tables out in the street. The intense smell and sound of people talking, eating, chewing betel nut, drinking beer, and smoking cigarettes consumed us, while sellers and beggars regularly tried to get our attention. During our meal, we had discussed and shared different travel-experiences, fun stories, and pictures, to Dedan's amusement. His dream is to travel for one year or at least see some more of the world. He proudly told us of the three countries he had been; Myanmar, Thailand and lately for work; Singapore. Singapore was an unchallenged favorite. Three countries, including Myanmar, are more than most locals have seen. Dedan laughs a bit under his breath and takes a sip of his beer as he leans relaxed back in his chair and smile. He seems to somehow disappear into his mind for a second. As he looks calmly out in the air and lights his cigarette, he had decided to tell us about his first meeting with the internet. I guess, for Dedan, this was the one story that we, the foreigners, would never surpass with our travels.

Dedan shakes his head a bit, laughing as he explains how he had saved some money over an extended period. He says: “At this time we had no internet like today, so we must go to café, and that was expensive.” This happened back in 2012, only 6 years ago. When Dedan had arrived at the café, he tells us how he was placed in front of a big old-style computer. While gesticulating the size of the computers screen, he almost knocks his beer of the table. The employee had opened a browser and a search-monitor for him, he was not sure if it was Google or another page. At the time, he would not have known the difference. Dedan is at this point, staring straight at me with crystal bright eyes; I could easily imagine shining stars in them. On the edge of his chair leaning forward eagerly, he continues smiling: “you know, the first thing I searched is ‘Yangon,’ not Bangkok or Singapore!” Dedan laughs heartwarmingly. “It was strange; I did not understand where the picture came from.” He jokes of the fact that the first thing he searched for was Yangon, his hometown when he could have typed anything else, and further how impressed he was of the pictures.

It is often easy to forget that Dedan and my other Burmese friends only had more extensive access to the internet since 2014. Today the smartphones seem to be present at all times in Yangon's streets. We laughed with Dedan, and of how it now is evident for him where these pictures came from. Dedan now works as a programmer, developing and coding applications for Android devices. He spent one year in private school and was lucky to get a job. When something was not functioning correctly on my phone, Dedan was always the person I asked first. That first experience in the small internet café back in 2012, turned out to be the beginning of a love story between Dedan, technology, and internet.

This thesis captures a particular point in Myanmar's history when extensive use of the internet has become common amongst residents since 2014. Dedan's story gives an impression of how important and incorporated in daily life the internet, technology, and this open access has become amongst some young professionals in Yangon today. How the world opened up for the Burmese people, and how it in many ways can create a feeling as being part of something bigger, and at the same time being somewhat inadequate. The enormous development happening after 2014 has brought many opportunities, but at the same time, it also uncovered limitations and challenges to overcome now and in the future. Furthermore, in Myanmar, it is today common amongst residents to interpret Facebook as the internet and use Facebook as the entry point to the internet. This means that everything you do online most often happens through the Facebook application on the smartphone.

This thesis aims to take a closer look at the use of the internet amongst young adult in Yangon, Myanmar. Through six months of ethnographical fieldwork, I tried to obtain a potentially more profound understanding of the use of Facebook as the internet in Myanmar. My main research questions are:

How did Facebook gain its position, and how does Facebook keep it?

What happens when Facebook becomes the primary internet access in a community?

How does the situation affect my informants, and how do they, themselves, understand it?

The thesis will look at literature from social media, infrastructure, feelings and emotions, and social performance. The next part will give an overview of the literature and theories that have informed my analysis. When looking into literature discussing technology and social media, in particular, there are two main ways to approach these topics. One side has an interpretation of the new technologies as something that becomes part of being a human and humanity, while the other position closer to STS-studies (Science and Technology Studies),

focuses more on the technology and how it inserts itself between people. I choose to spend some time presenting the two approaches as well as other literature, as these two interpretations will be presented and discussed throughout the thesis as a tool to analyze my ethnographic material.

Theoretical Discussion

Technology as Facilitator

My bachelor essay on communication through social media was drawing on Wilson and Person and how they aim at a definition of what “the internet” is (Samuel M. Wilson & Peterson, 2002). They discuss how the internet was understood as cyberspace and that what happens in this place can be interpreted as a hallucination, as a space outside the bodily world (Gibson, 1984). However, this understanding was not persistent, and Wilson and Peterson argued towards an interpretation that internet, or social media, do not grow as space beside the physical world, but instead becomes a part of it (Samuel M. Wilson & Peterson, 2002). It is therefore not a hallucination, but rather a reality that becomes implemented into our understanding of our surroundings. This interpretation of internet, or social media, recognized the importance they play in day-to-day life as well as a recognition of the communication online as real in the same way as with face-to-face communication. “The general conclusion is that the technologies comprising the Internet, and all the text and media that exist in it are in themselves cultural products” (Samuel M. Wilson & Peterson, 2002, p. 449). With this point of view, social media is researchable and should be studied, as well as it opens up for a discussion if social media mediates or facilitates conversations.

Daniel Miller is an anthropologist that initially worked with consumer studies and later approached social media and new technologies. In his later work, he has addressed social media as something that becomes part of the human and our humanity. He claims that social media is a skill a person can attain, as with driving a car, social media can, therefore, be a natural part of being human and humanity. The technology makes no difference whatsoever to our essential humanity (Daniel Miller, 2016, p. 8). Miller studied Facebook in Trinidad where he would refer to Facebook as “the book of truth” and how Facebook has the potential to destroy privacy as we know it and transform it into something public (Daniel Miller, 2011, pp. 172-173).

He discusses how Facebook never exists in its isolation and that it, therefore, cannot show the totality of the people we meet and how the “public” is on Facebook. This is better understood

as an aggregate of private spheres, it consists of all the people one knows privately, but in one place and that it is all open to each other (Daniel Miller, 2011, pp. 174-175).

What Miller discusses further is a Trinidadian understanding of Facebook as a place where one can see who people are, and this discussion is picked up in both chapter 5 and 6.

One particular argument Miller presents is that Facebook is not just a corporate company and that Facebook is often misused as something global. Yes, it is global in the sense that Facebook is used pretty much all over the world, but as Miller argues, that is also true for whiskey. It does not naturally follow that Facebook is becoming some kind of aggregate entity like a global consciousness or brain (Daniel Miller, 2011, p. 190). This is a view this thesis supports, and I do not discuss Facebook itself as a global phenomenon. I do, however, refer to the company Facebook and its headquarters, as something international in chapter 6, but this should not be misunderstood as a statement of Facebook itself as global. Another point Miller makes is that in Trinidad, Facebook, in similar ways as in Yangon, is used as the internet. That does not, however, suggest that it is because of “Facebook” itself, but rather because of the seamless ways Facebook combine the different interactions and activities that the user wants in one place alone. If another company were able to deliver a similar package, there is nothing that would suggest that the user is unconditionally loyal to Facebook and would not switch (Daniel Miller, 2011, p. 203).

Together with Jolynna Sinanan, Miller outlined the “theory of attainment,” which serves as an inspiration in my analysis. This theory suggests that technology, rather than placing itself in between the speakers mediating the conversation, it facilitates it. They argue that people have relationships with each other and that they have relationships with technology, but mostly, we cannot disentangle the two. Furthermore, they argue that people have never reduced their relationships merely to other people. Just a few examples could be; pets, your house, or a bible (D. Miller & Sinanan, 2014, pp. 3-6). This means that “attainment” takes a step further than it is close synonyms, such as achievement. Attainment, in Miller and Sinanan’s view, is when something, a thing or a skill, becomes attained when facilities are taken-for-granted. It goes beyond achievement; it becomes part of humanity.

In Socrates view, written text was a direct threat to human memory; therefore, a person who had learned to write would be seen as somewhat less human. It would affect the human “completeness” and create a faulty human. Ironically, the skill of writing is now the reason we know about Socrates belief (D. Miller & Sinanan, 2014). Today a person is by no means regarded as a lesser human when writing. Miller and Sinanan argue that we need to be open to

the idea that whatever the future brings, which nobody can predict, we need to be open since it is going to be part of our humanity one way or another, as with writing (D. Miller & Sinanan, 2014, pp. 12-15). Attainment is then looked upon as something that has become latent in us, something we do not think about or take for granted. This latency would also be valid for future technology. Technology creates as well as make us realize the hidden or concealed in us. This does not mean that they have an exclusive optimistic view of attainment. Miller and Sinanan exemplify with weapons. In biblical times, people were able to imagine the destruction of a group of people, but it was hard to accomplish with only access to one to one combat. Later, we got access to more and more heavy weapons that have made it possible, and it is now part of today's warfare (D. Miller & Sinanan, 2014, p. 12).

Performed Sociality

In the project *Why we post*, Miller presents the concept of social media as a *scalable sociality* (Daniel Miller, 2016). Social media is not the platforms we use, but rather a place within we socialize. They refer to the term coined by Madianou and Miller; *polymedia* (Madianou & Miller, 2013). Polymedia is a theory that argues that a platform is defined only in relation to the other platforms, and not in its isolation, as Miller argued about Facebook in Trinidad. Social media is then the sum of these platforms and becomes a place we socialize (Daniel Miller, 2016). Scalable Sociality is aiming to show how people use these social platforms with different intentions and how the platforms themselves can be arranged and positioned through two scales; *private to public* and *small- to big-audience*. One example amongst 11-18 year old's in England; Snapchat is the most private and positioning itself in the inner circle; private and small audience, while Instagram is in opposition; public and a big audience (Daniel Miller, 2016, p. 6). The scales then, somehow represent the context or frame where one chooses to socialize inside in the given situation. What feels natural and ok for the person, and is it in terms with the given norms of the surroundings? Do I post this to my closest friends, or is this something I want everyone to see?

Miller and Sinanan draw on Goffman (1969) and his concept of frames in the argument of attainment, how different frames shape a conversation or social situation one way or another, in physical life as in online life. Consider a few examples; such as two strangers' conversation at a bus stop, a parental meeting at school, or a group of friends at a dinner party, a letter to your doctor, a chatbot at custom service or a group chat with close friends. There is always a set of frames that involves some expectations of how we talk and behave. There is an underlying structure in every situation, on-stage or off-stage (Goffman, 1969).

Technology, or Facebook in my case, involves a similar set of frames that you do not see or are necessarily aware of, but they affect the conversation or the social event similarly as the social norms the two strangers at the bus stop encounters. These socially produced frames give the context of what is expected from a person, online or offline, and it is inside these social frames that performed sociality unfolds. What is interesting in using Goffman's understanding of frames and front-stage and back-stage is that in his work, back-stage has a smaller audience, if there is an audience at all. In this thesis, the back-stage can involve a big audience but still, entail a similar function. Goffman's work, therefore, inspires the thesis itself, and it is addressed in both chapter 5 and 6.

Technology as Mediator

After presenting the approach of social media as a facilitator, something that becomes part of our humanity, I will now present the approach closer to STS-studies and an understanding of social media as a mediator. Turkle writes in her book, *Alone Together – why we expect more of technology and less from each other*, which title serves as a central point itself, that technology is seductive, especially when meeting our human vulnerabilities. Also, humans are vulnerable; we are lonely, but at the same time, fearful of intimacy (Turkle, 2011, p. 1). Turkle claims that the new technologies, such as social media, AI (artificial intelligence) and robotics, come between people, reduce and mediate conversations and socialization and function as a substitute for something real, and offer a machine-mediated relationship (Turkle, 2011, p. 3). She argues towards an approach that understands social media and new technologies as something potentially disturbing and always meditating. Referring to the journalist Nicholas Carr (Carr, 2010), who writes how the internet and new technology is challenging long term memory. She argues that as we try to reclaim our conversation we are literary at war with our self, and that we defend connectivity as a way to be close to each other, even though that we simultaneously hide from each other (Turkle, 2011, pp. 281-296). Turkle, therefore, focusing on mediation, distinguishes between online and offline, it is two different places to operate.

Alex Lambert, a new media researcher, wrote the book *Intimacy and Friendship on Facebook*. He writes that Facebook is something more than a thing; it is an assemblage of protocols, software, interfaces, media content, contracts, marketing, public relations, surveillance systems, bureaucracy, shareholders, users, and global and local cultures, and the list goes on (Lambert, 2013, p. 1). It is a socio-technical system comprised not only by machines, but also of human actors, regulations, social norms, and social structures (Benski &

Fisher, 2014, p. 4). Facebook involves more than just a webpage, users and how the users use this webpage. It is a whole system influenced by different actors in all directions and on every level. What this means is that, rather than creating new, Facebook intensifies already existing relationships through intensified intimacy and a potentially jealous gaze. Lambert draws on Turkle's work, placing himself closer to mediation than facilitation with describing Facebook as a contemporary shift towards a society with mediated systems (Lambert, 2013, p. 184). However, he still criticizes her view as a bit naïve when Turkle writes that social media ask us to represent our self in simplified ways (Turkle, 2011, p. 185). Lambert writes that:

“It neglects how people mobilize resources of identification. It misses the complexity of performance context... .Most importantly, it does not take into account how performances extend into social interactions, becoming complex performances of connection. The self-presentation on Facebook are not simplistic, but are rich, layered processes.” (Lambert, 2013, p. 174)

The mediation theory distinguishes between online and offline, while the theory of attainment focuses on the other hand, at technology as something that is part of our humanity and says that you cannot distinguish between online and offline. A relationship is as much dependent today on the “online” sphere as the “offline,” and the two are now the same (D. Miller & Sinanan, 2014, p. 6). Turkle argues for robotics as, in themselves, a proposal for substitution for people. In doing so, Turkle points out that recent technological advances are leading to a loss of something essential about humanity, which is different from Miller and Sinanan's view (D. Miller & Sinanan, 2014, p. 5). Turkle regards technology as something artificial that imposes itself between the conversationalist and mediates that conversation, rather than to facilitates the conversation.

I will use Turkle's term *tethered self*, roughly explained as a *connected self*. She writes how the smartphone is always-on/always-on-you, which is something most people find relatable (Turkle, 2011). She writes that people cannot get enough of each other, as long as we can keep it at a distance, which social media allows. Being tethered involves being “one” with your smartphone; it is a feeling that something is missing if you do not have it nearby. Turkle talks about how it can be seen as a phantom limb, and as with phantom limbs, gives us phantom pain or reactions. A feeling of vibration or notification even though nothing had happened, it is almost as a tick. This view will not be discussed any further, but the thesis will use the term *tethered*, then referring to the connected part of Turkle's argument. In my view, to be tethered is closer to the theory of attainment, rather than the mediation Turkle argues towards.

Infrastructure

Discussing infrastructure is an underlying theme throughout the thesis. Infrastructure is ubiquitous, its present at all times and can be found in every part of our life. Infrastructure is addressed as something that builds relationships between things, and it goes beyond perceived static things such as roads, buildings, and piping systems that other things flow through (Appel, 2015). It is a built network that facilitates the flow of projects and can expand, float, standardize distributions and extend political rationalities. Appel argues towards a new view on how to think of infrastructures with tools that allow us to think of infrastructures metaphorical capacity through its materialistic form. Infrastructure works on different levels and with other infrastructures that depend on each other to function properly. With a conversation on infrastructure's accretion, they argue that infrastructure will seldom be a system of total power. Instead, they are fragile forms made as much of modernity's ruination as its promises (Appel, 2015, p. accretion).¹

One of the main messages they give us is that we should aim to give our senses more space. When opening up the floor to the sensual spectrum, we can, potentially, gain a better understanding of how people make sense of their social, technical and infrastructural world (Appel, 2015, p. sense). Through the complex infrastructure that one can argue that Facebook is, the thesis will discuss and work towards a broader understanding of how young adults in Yangon live and make sense of their life and surroundings. Furthermore, how this comes forth in the use of Facebook and their smartphone, looking deeper into interpretations of emotions and Facebooks own position in society.

Emotions

Alongside discussing the technologies, themselves, I will aim to address how emotions and feelings can come across as more than just a feeling amongst young adults in Yangon. I will show how, with the arrival of Facebook, feelings and affection have now one more platform to be expressed and that Facebook is used as a tool to communicate them. Further, the thesis will look at how emotion can be used as a compass to navigate the internet, or Facebook, and

¹ When referring to Appel (2015), the page number is given as the name of the given article, since this infrastructure literature is a web page created as a "toolbox" with small articles. There is therefore no number to provide.

legitimize facts. To be able to do so, I will use Unni Wikan's work in Bali as inspiration (Wikan, 1990). In her work, she explains how the Balinese connect thoughts and feelings, something she calls feeling-thoughts. She also introduces the term *resonance*. Resonance evokes shared human experience, what people across "cultures" and through time have in common. Unlike the concept of "culture," that tends to underscore differentness and praise the exotic, "resonance" builds bridges from a lived realization that this is the practiced way.

"It does not deny difference... ..but renders difference relatively insignificant in the face of that which counts more: shared human experience" (Wikan, 1990, pp. 281-282)

Wikan shows us how experience is being shaped, and memories activated by the active engagement of feeling-thoughts and uses feeling-thought as a lens to see things through. Her informants would laugh at the western view of feeling as something irrational since they regard feelings and thoughts as the same, is then thoughts irrational as well? This way of looking at emotion and thoughts I will bring in to my argumentation and analysis in chapter 5. There seem to be some similarities between the way Balinese and Burmese links these factors and makes sense of them. When one of my Burmese informants talks about the connection of brain and heart, Wikan says that from her stay in Bali she has grown convinced that feeling-thought may be the better concept in that it does justice to a flow of experiences. This flow is neither embedded "in" the heart nor "in" the mind; it flows (Wikan, 1990, pp. 137-139). Brain and heart are not distinguished but part of the same process.

In chapter 5. I will also address Michelle Rosaldo and her works on guilt and shame amongst the Ilongot people (Rosaldo, 1983). She writes that "shame" is accepted as necessary constraint amongst Ilongot, in order to avoid acknowledgment of conflict breeding inequalities. Further that "shame" when associated with action, is individual and that it is undesirable, but, equally, "shame" is associated with autonomy and respect (Rosaldo, 1983, pp. 144-145). It is essential to recognize that in Rosaldo's work amongst Ilongot, their particular understanding of "shame" and "guilt" is connected to violence and extreme actions. This is not the case in Yangon; however, it has while discussing privacy and surveillance proved a helpful tool to distinguish and understand my informants.

Anthropology and Myanmar

Myanmar, earlier named Burma, has been an essential contribution to several works through the anthropological history. However, there is still much research to do in this country, and

unlike its neighborhood countries, there has not been a lot of anthropological studies in Myanmar. Hlaing reminds us that it is crucial to recognize that what we today understand as the country of Myanmar is not the same areas as what was discussed in earlier work. There are socio-political entities that have “evolved” into what we now know as a country, and that today’s Myanmar is in many ways a product of British colonial construction. “In fact, until the European era, *Myanma Pyi* did not refer to a nation but merely to the territory where the Myanma people, the ‘Burman,’ lived and were dominant” (Hlaing, 2008, p. 240). He further writes that Myanmar’s contribution to the development and growth in the anthropology was mainly as “Burma as a system” rather than “Burma as a place.”²

The first significant contribution to the study of Myanmar was by Sir James Scott with; *The Burman: His life and notions* (J. G. Scott, 1910). This book is a result of Scotts work as an administrator and his background as a journalist in the British colonial times. The work presents an in-depth interpretation of the “Burman ways” and society, addressing topics from language, family, medicine, cosmology and so forth. Following Scott, there were not conducted any proper and truly anthropological work until Edmund Leach’s *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (Leach, 1954) that was the first real attempt to get a broader picture of Myanmar. In fact, it is only after the Second World War that one can find truly academical work from Myanmar (Hlaing, 2008). Leach’s work in Kachin state aims to show how other groups differentiate the Kachin people as Shan and Burmans through more than languages and culture; they are primarily differentiated by a framework of political ideas (Sadan & Robinne, 2007). Leaches argument is of a system of inter-ethnic relations that goes beyond the Theravada Buddhist civilizations (Hlaing, 2008, p. 243). His works has been an important contribution to the political anthropological work, as well as to historians such as Michael Aung-Thwin (Aung-Thwin, 1985; Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2013).

Hlaing explains how Myanmar’s independence in 1948 weakened the British colonial interest in the development of anthropology in and of the country. Beside Leach, American and French anthropologists continued this work. (Hlaing, 2008, p. 245) However, the famous George Orwell’s first novel, *Burmese Days* from 1935 (Orwell, 2009) is worth mentioning. It

² In this section I use the name «Burma» when referring directly to other literature using «Burma» rather than «Myanmar». Every other mentions of the country will be as «Myanmar», in line with the rest of this thesis.

is inspired by his time serving with the Indian Imperial Police in the country. The novel describes the culture, the Burmese people, and social structures from the colonial times. In its way, Orwell's grotesque descriptions are at the same time strongly influenced by his love for the country as well as the people. A surprisingly amount of Orwell's descriptions can still be recognized in Myanmar today, which can show how the culture is preserved through politics and by the people.

Other significant contributions are Manning Nash with his *The Golden Road to Modernity: Village Life in Contemporary Burma* (Nash, 1965). The book is a study of rural areas in upper Myanmar. The publication aims to do more than just present ethnographical facts of life with existing theories; Nash aims to give some guidance to rural development workers of the Burmese government (Brohm, 1966). Melford Spiro contributed with his *Burmese Supernaturalism* (Spiro, 1978) where he investigated the relationship between Buddhism and Burmese animism. Following the functionalism of Weber, recognizing the importance of religion for placing meaning in the unknown, in Myanmar, its function is more utilitarian (Thornburg, 1998).

The general discussion in anthropology about area studies in the 80-90s affected Myanmar-studies as well. One argument is that area studies have a too narrow focus and is therefore not capable of engaging in proper comparative studies. As a result, some works are written on transnational problems in Southeast Asia and include case studies from Myanmar, by people with direct experience from the country. On the other side, some subject experts include Myanmar in their work, with mixed results. Selth writes: "Burma's varied history and complex problems are not well understood by non-Burma specialists." (Selth, 2010, p. 426). Recent scholars that included Myanmar is amongst others; Michael Adas that included a case study from Myanmar (Adas, 1979), Benedict Anderson cities Myanmar several times in his *imagined Communities* from 1983 (Anderson, 2006), where Myanmar has shown itself as a valid tool to illustrate broader issues. James C. Scott is an anthropologist crucial not to omit as he is well known for his work on peasant rebellions (J. C. Scott, 1976). This work had a considerable impact while looking into more general and well-known work in anthropology and political science (Hlaing, 2008, p. 253).

Still, up into the late 2000s, one could still be punished with imprisonment for criticizing the government, which also means that the Burmese people are unwilling to speak with researches, this includes local scholars. Basically, since 1988 in particular, everyone following Myanmar has been reminded of the limitations of their knowledge, repeatedly. As a

result, there are numerous of myths and misconceptions that have taken root, caused by the lack of verifiable facts and high demand of reports about Myanmar (Selth, 2010, p. 432).

Today, looking back at decades of neglect and access restrictions, area studies debates, misconceptions and so forth, the Myanmar studies are blooming. Never before has the interest and research for Myanmar been more active. Compared to its surrounding countries, there is a lack of knowledge and understanding of Myanmar. When Selth wrote his article in 2010, there were still a military government and a strict policy, a closed country. Moreover, as will be explained in chapter 3., it has since then become somewhat a democracy, opened up, gained access and contact outside its borders, more comprehensive internet access, and so forth. This also brings with a higher number of researches conducted in the country, and in the years to come more knowledge and understanding of Myanmar - which this thesis is aiming to be a contribution to.

Thesis Outline

Before taking an explicit look at my empirical material and go into a discussion of Facebook in Yangon I will in chapter 3. “Myanmar – The Land of Gold and Dust” introduce the historical context of the country. In doing so, I present my field site, the city of Yangon, and contextualize the place to the history so that the reader gains some important background-knowledge ahead of my discussion.

Through three empirical chapters, the thesis discusses different factors of the situation of Facebook in Yangon. Chapter 4. “Battle of The Fonts” explores the problem of the digital script in Myanmar and the Burmese language. How is this conflict involved in practical issues when communicating through a digital device, and how can it discriminate different version of languages? Furthermore, how this font-conflict experienced by people working in tech-companies or who have a particular interest in the field. How can such an issue be oblivious for some and self-evident for others? The font-issue is an underlying problem affecting other parts of social life as well.

Chapter 5. “On Facebook is The Real Feelings” aim at an understanding of how feelings and emotions can play out online, how they are experienced, and how they are performed and interpreted in Yangon. Further follows a discussion of what is considered private and public and to what extent Facebook mediates or facilitates conversations.

The chapter also addresses how feelings can be looked upon as an emotional compass to navigate the internet, or in this case, Facebook.

The last empirical chapter, Chapter 6. “Facebook and Performed Sociality” ties up the themes discussed earlier. It addresses how sociality is performed online and how Facebook is part of the process of creating and contextualize frames to perform within. The chapter addresses what this can tell us about Facebook's algorithms and how they create a “Happy place,” security and to some extent, surveillance. Through an empirical case, the chapter aims to demonstrate what can be possible, and in this case, an authentic, outcome when Facebook is interpreted as the internet amongst local users in Yangon. I aim to understand how Facebook has gained its position, how the locals in Yangon use it, how the immediate access potentially affects them on both personal and national levels, and that is a potential “next” for Myanmar and Facebook. Chapter 7. “The Digital Tsunami – Reflecting Throughs” aims towards some closing reflections on temporality, and moreover, the thesis empirical findings.

Chapter 2.

“On Method”

The second I step out of the airplane; intense sun hits my face. This was more than welcome after a long trip with a tired body. It had been some long and intense hours since I hugged my dad goodbye and handed him my winter coat back in Oslo. Now, however, I finally had arrived at the final destination and furthermore, my new home for the next six months. As I got inside the airport, I attempted, hopelessly, not to look too much like a tourist. I walked with a folder containing copies of all documents imaginable ready in my right hand, a heart-shaped pillow with a picture of my cat in the left one, and a sincere wish to pronounce the Burmese “hello” correct at first try. My attempt failed greatly, but I received an amused smile from the lady behind the desk and an approved visa. Pleased, I got my backpack and grabbed a taxi to the hostel, ready to get to work straight away. I had finally arrived after extensive preparations, nerves, and anticipation. At the hostel, I was relaxing in a chair and writing in my notebook as I heard the ringing sound of a gong in the distance. It was still early morning, and one of my very first experience in Myanmar was the traditional almsgiving procession with monks, all dressed in their red, saffron-colored robes with shaved heads, collecting today's rice. Mingalaba, and welcome to Yangon!

This thesis is based upon a six months long fieldwork in Yangon, Myanmar. When I arrived in January 2018, I chose to take some time to acclimatize and get to know my new surroundings and figure out how to go on with my fieldwork. In addition, I started a four-week language course in basic Burmese speaking, listening, reading and writing. This period gave me the space I needed to find a place to stay, get used to Yangon city, learn to communicate with some Burmese, and basic do's and don'ts. My home became an apartment I shared with two British teachers in Hledan district, a bit north of downtown Yangon.

Downtown Yangon is viewed as the city center. It is where most things happen, which also makes it a busy and noisy district. Hledan was a good choice, situated a bit further away from the chaos of downtown, but also worked as a smaller center with everything you need to live comfortably. It is also a district where foreign people do not usually choose to live, which makes it a nice place to get good contact with the locals and their routines. Right outside my apartment was one of Yangon's biggest street-markets, every day booming of fresh fruit, vegetables, meat, as well as clothes, spices and plastic baskets, carpets and whatever you would need. In the same street, I had laundry-service, sewers, and hairdressers, all-family run.

It eventually became my morning routine to go through the street, have short conversations with, my neighbors, exchanging's pleasantries, play a little with the kids and buy fruit or vegetables as today's lunch or snack. My Burmese, however limited, made this possible, and most of the people in my street did not master a level of English for a conversation. With limited levels of English, Burmese, and body language, we managed to understand each other somewhat.

Language

The Burmese language was one of my main concerns before entering the field, knowing that I would not be able to master fluent Burmese in my limited timeframe. Inspired by Wikan (1992) and her discussion around *resonance* and *passing theories* I aimed at using my limited Burmese as an allied rather than an enemy. Passing theories, to always think through how a meeting or an event could turn out to be, and then being open to what happened in the moments, was helpful in that it became evident whenever something did not go "as expected". Walking through my street talking with my neighbors what I could manage, I experienced something similar to what Wikan explained from her stay in Cairo; "What is striking me now... ..is *how much* I understood and *how much* they assumed I could understand, without having much of a "language." (Wikan, 1992, p. 469). These small conversations and all of the observations I got from just *hanging out* in my neighborhood, as well as the time I spent with other locals that could not fully speak English, have given me more insight than what I realized at the time. These experiences and the knowledge I gained later helped me understand my informants and their social frames better.

To understand and speak Burmese better than any typical tourist was at most times, an excellent way to gain interest and trust from the locals. To be able to demonstrate that I cared and tried to understand the people I associated myself with. Sometimes it would just end up in body language and communicate with facial expressions; other times, I got a language lecture, and other times, it led to extended conversations. However, because of my limited language skills, I cannot adequately speak for the people I could not fully communicate with. In this kind of cases, the etic and emic data is based on second-hand information and/or my understanding and interpretation of the situation. I do not handle these encounters as primary information, and it is not a significant part of any argument. They are, however, a big piece in my puzzle to be able to resonate with my field and I, therefore, handle this information as such. Following the guidelines from The Norwegian National Research Committees (NESH) that states that in humanities and social science, involvement and interpretation often is an

integral process of the research this data is as much real data as the conversations with my primary informants (NESH, 2016, p. 10).

Gaining Access

As a result of my limited Burmese skills, all of my informants can communicate with a decent level of English. Some better than others, but still without notable struggles that made it possible to have a natural and flowing conversation. This means, however, that my field site, as well as geographically limited to Yangon, is limited to persons with decent English skills. As mentioned earlier, I am not able to represent those I cannot communicate with as primary informants, but rather through secondary information and interpretations. During my fieldwork, I never gained access to one particular group of people, or as first planned, particular street or stores that specialize in cellphones. As my interest initially was the technology of the smartphone itself and how these were used, main streets or stores felt like the right place to start. Both my language limitation and their lack of interest in me hanging out with them made this extremely challenging, and I soon realized that I needed to think in alternative ways to gain access. The new strategy was to actively search for people of interest in bars, cafés, through other people I had met on different occasions and attended different activities, events, and walks. This strategy was more successful as I became acquainted with several people from different parts of Yangon with different backgrounds.

A genuine interest for the meeting between technology, people, and society was the foundation for this fieldwork, as I had already written my bachelor essay on communication through social media. It was therefore natural that I would meet other people with a similar interest in technology and social media, and that conversation would be more naturally connected to my work rather than with other people I would meet. Halfway through the fieldwork, I rented a desk in an open space office to work more efficiently. This desk was, not by coincidence, rented out by a company working with start-ups in the technology sector. This position gave me an insight into what was evolving in Yangon and furthermore, easier access and information on different events and people. As a result of my interests, how and where I met people that I connected with, most of my informants have a particular interest in technology, smartphones and or social media, and therefore they would often have more extensive knowledge regarding the topic than most people in Yangon.

During my fieldwork, I also become part of a group that created a campaign called; *Break the silence: Ask for Zarni*, which is working with addressing sexual harassment in the Yangon bar-scene. This group consists of local persons and foreigners living in Yangon. This activity was not deliberately meant to become a source of information for my fieldwork but did after some time give insight into the field of fonts, something I could not foresee. The campaign is therefore used in chapter 4 as an example of digital script challenges, without describing any participants in the group.

Through different contacts that knew of my work, I was asked to present one workshop and one lecture in basic research skill at two different business schools in Yangon. The lecture was conducted in February and the workshop in May, both with an underlying goal to get in contact with students, as well as the benefits of experience with planning and conducting presentations and workshops. From the lecture, I, unfortunately, did not gain much information other than a few conversations after the lecture itself. However, the workshop introduced me to students that would participate in my focus-group later on. The focus-group was conducted to gain more specific information regarding the font-issue addressed in chapter 4 since this was an issue I struggled to getting a good overview and understanding of. In hindsight, I experienced that a workshop is preferable over a lecture since you get the opportunity to engage with the student in a more effective way than through a lecture. I experienced that students were more interested in helping me out after working a bit with me and get to know me ahead of time.

Fieldwork Strategies and Positioning

As an anthropologist, participating observation, or “hanging out” was my primary method during the fieldwork. I would meet my informants in day to day situations, travel with them, and spend some time getting to know them and gain a relation built on mutual trust regarding my work. This strategy would imply that my main tool in the field is myself and my interpretation and understanding of my surroundings. Accordingly, the ethnographer needs to be reflexive of the position and its affection and interpretations. As Madden writes:

“a critical appreciation of positionality is a tool with which to check my ethnographical baggage for presumption and prejudice... ..Ethnographers, just like the groups they study, come with histories and socialization, and the influence of these elements in ethnographic research needs to be properly understood” (Madden, 2010, p. 22)

This would imply that everything the ethnographer does during the fieldwork will, some way or another affect the outcome of a situation. Just who I am, where I come from, and how I

look, as a Norwegian, educated blond and blue-eyed female person, did make a difference in how my informants saw me. Sometimes I would experience that some of my informants would position themselves a bit “on the side” of their Burmese identity and closer to my western position. In a way, they would reflect what they saw as “western” back onto me and refer to local Burmese people as “them” or “they,” separating themselves from this group, while other time it would be the opposite. Especially while meeting my informants in group-setting with me as the only foreigner, they would amplify what is local, pointing out how I am different from them — maybe laughing at how I ate with chopsticks or how I could wear those loose pants instead of a local longyi. This would, naturally in one way or other make a difference in how my fieldnotes would look from the given day, something I always was aware of. It is essential for the ethnographer to reflect on and account for how one’s values and attitudes affect the choice of topic, data sources, and interpretations in the particular field site (NESH, 2016).

During typical day to day settings, I would avoid writing in my notebook in front of my informants. I, therefore, was dependent on memorizing conversations or situations so that I could replicate the given information in the best way possible into my notebook. Aware that memory is not always trustworthy in itself, I always wore a black fanny-pack containing a small notebook. The notebook contained shorter notes and sentences to help remember later on while writing my extensive notes on my computer. Dedan would often joke about this fanny-pack, acknowledging how it was practical, but it looked funny. A while into my stay, he would additionally make jokes of my small bladder, since he would more often than other people see me leave to the toilet, well knowing I was about to write notes. A little acknowledgment of a perfected technique of writing notes while on a squatting toilet is suitable. As Dedan, the rest of my informants were well aware of me writing down conversations or situations, but it became clear that they as well as myself, mostly preferred me to not write in front of them as the conversations often went dead or slowed down at the sight of the notebook.

In the second part of the fieldwork, I conducted interviews with my primary informants, as well as with a few people one can consider as experts. This was one person working with technology in Myanmar daily and a teacher. Besides, I had one focus-group with students to gain more access to accurate information on the font-conflict addressed in chapter 4. These interviews and the focus-group are all recorded to be able to, during the conversation, leave the notebook on the table more or less unused, only noting down thoughts and further

questions, and later go through the recordings in detail. Wikan writes that; “I consider the use of tape recorder and also notebook problematic in social encounters in the field, and best to be avoided except for certain clearly defined purposes” (Wikan, 1992, p. 478). She connects this to our ability to have too much focus on the words themselves and their exact utterance, potentially losing important context and sometimes even the speaker’s intention. I do agree to some extent, which is the reason I seldom wrote in my notebook in front of my informant. My strategy was often to focus on the person speaking, listening, working towards an understanding of what they aimed to tell me. When choosing to record, I always asked the persons ahead of time, and only in an interview setting where it was somewhat expected of me. I used my phone to record, with the screen down not to be a focus-point, carrying out a conversation more or less naturally. The recordings were then transferred to my hard-disk and then deleted from my phone and computer. I had some notes with me but aimed for my interviews to be as natural as possible, letting my interlocutors lead the conversation without too much interruption.

The Field as it Became

My informants, or friends as I often refer to them as are mainly people that do not have any connection to each other. These people I would meet in bars or on different events such as concerts, voluntary work, or cultural walks. All of my informants fall under the category of young adults (18-33 years) in Yangon, manage a decent level of English, something which is not an evident skill, own a smartphone with Facebook, have an education and were interested in hanging out with me. I have a mixture of both male and female informants, as well as different levels of educations and personal interest. This made it possible for me to compare different topics and their interpretation or understanding of the situation. What is similar, what is different, and how can this be explained? Since my selection of informants have varying knowledge and proficiency within technology, even though most have an interest in this topic, I found it interesting to see how the different interpretations could play out and if it could show me something new.

Since I was not able to find one particular group of people, I was dependent on meeting people whenever they had time. Also, I was aware that it needed to be worth their time since not all relations evolved into a true friendship. To make it a positive experience for them, as well as keeping the interest in *catching up with me* as we often said, I aimed to variate the activities or places we met up. Activities could be everything from meeting up at Ice-Berry for some ice cream, attending a concert, drinking beers at a bar or while eating dinner, trips to

exhibitions or out of the city. With one of my informants, Thaung, I would get language lectures as a way to have a natural reason to meet up regularly. Thaung works as a doctor apprentice, and he quickly became interested in my work and encouraged me to write notes in front of him. He is in his mid-20's, single and appreciates a great live concert, preferably jazz, blues or some rock. I met Thaung at a walk called Cultural Heritage Initiative Tour (#CHIT), where the group walks to all the different religious sites in downtown Yangon such as the Sule Pagoda, the Mosque and the Catholic church. On the very same walk, I met two girls and best friends; Mimi and Pemala. They are both 18 years old and study social science at the University in Yangon. I would always meet the two together, and always in daylight since the girls were not outdoors after dark. They introduced me to the university, and we would often eat ice cream or have lunch together.

My first week in Yangon, I met Dedan at one of the favorite bars in downtown. Dedan is in his early 20's and works as an application developer for android software; he grew into becoming one of my closest friends. We most often met for some drinks and food, and he would often introduce me to his other group of close associates. Whenever I traveled out of Yangon, most of the times Dedan would join me, or I would join his plans. This was both shorter day-trips or longer weekend trips, and he always acted as my own personal local guide. Through Dedan, I was introduced to Win, who is some years older, and that had been Dedan close friend for years. Win is a well-educated engineer and works in the oil sector. He travels back and forth to Yangon quite often. As with Dedan, Win became one of my closer friends during my stay. When Dedan would talk more about "superficial stuff" as technology, movies, and travels, as Win would say, Win himself was more focused on relationships, religion, spiritual and cultural conversation. I was lucky enough to join a trip to Bagan together with Dedan, Win, and Win's family (Mother, Aunt, and two sisters). In Bagan, I shared the room with his mother and sister, none who spoke English. On this trip, I got the opportunity to spend an extended time with a local family, following a typical weekend-trip, including visits to different pagodas and temples where they included me in the rituals and the rest of the trip's activities.

In addition to my extended time spent with Thaung, Mimi, Pemala, Dedan, and Win, I have informants that were briefer encounters. These people will be introduced throughout the thesis and are teachers, students, people working with technology and/or have an interest in this sector. Most of my informants were not my close friends, and they did not often invite me to gatherings with their friends without me actively asking. I did, however, feel that they

regarded me a friend and an exciting person they enjoyed spending time with, but most would not include me in their inner circle, something which is perfectly understandable. They were, however, extremely helpful and eager to discuss anything that would help me with my work. This often happened without me explicitly asking them to do this, and so, these encounters were always enjoyable and informative.

Ethical considerations

All of my informants are anonymized throughout the thesis through different pseudonyms. The given descriptions of their characters and personalities are correct but are at the same time general characteristics so that you cannot recognize a person. Work, offices, and residential areas are anonymized for protection of my informants. Hla, which is described in chapter 3., is the only exception for this way of protecting my informants. Hla is a character that is used as a literary instrument and is a combination of both the informant as a person, her descriptions, and my personal experiences. Therefore, the character Hla only appears in this particular contextualizing chapter.

As an additional measure, I created a Facebook-profile used as a researcher-profile. On this profile, I made sure to have a picture where people that knew me would recognize me, but it is still taken from a distance and not detailed. My friend-list was hidden in both my private and research-profile. The profile-description informed my “Facebook-friends” that I was an anthropologist working on social media; additionally, people connected to this profile were informed ahead of time. This research-profile were used to follow what people wrote in status updates, which picture they shared, what kind of things they liked and interfere with, and so on. I intentionally followed different groups to see what kind of information was written, shared, and discussed.

Since knowledge and communication was something I was interested in early on, especially consideration education, I followed different health-informative groups as well as technology, newspapers, and so on. NESH guidelines state that: “The rules of the forum may provide some indication of the user’s reasonable expectations of publicity, i.e., the extent to which the users expect that the information published in the forum will be public or only shared between members.”(NESH, 2019, pp. 15-16). During my fieldwork and in the time back in Norway I saved some screenshots of different interesting posts, pages or comments. All screenshots are by people or posts that were aware of my work and have given their consent, or they are from public groups and public discussions. All names are anonymized in these pictures and cannot

be traced back. NESH' guidelines further state that it is eventually up to the researchers him- or herself to consider whether or not the information is ethical to use (NESH, 2019). The pictures and quotes of the post shared in this thesis are published in a domain where I consider them intentionally published as public, and/or the people involved have given their consent.

After some time, the two Facebook-profiles somewhat blended as I gained more and more friends that became closer. During my fieldwork oral consent strategy was mainly used, with emphasis on the clarity of my work. The people I met regularly for six months were informed and asked several times to make sure they understood my work and that I would write down a lot of what we talked about. More importantly, I wanted to make sure they knew that they were allowed to say no and tell me when specific information was talked about amongst friends only, not to be used in research. This was done on some occasions and respected by me. Whenever I would meet people in more official and formal situations, I used business cards printed ahead of my fieldwork, and they contained all my information and a short description of the focus areas in my work. The project was notified and registered by NSD (Norwegian Center For Research Data) prior to the beginning of my fieldwork.

During my fieldwork, I stayed in Myanmar under a business-visa from Telenor Myanmar. Through contacts in Telenor Norway, I was connected to their office in Yangon and was supposed to do a small task for Telenor Myanmar. Because of miscommunication and internal changes in Telenor, my project never came to anything. I had, however, already collected some information, but regarding the circumstances, we agreed that I would instead have a lecture of basic research skills for the office's employees working with development of content. Once more, with my time running out, and even though I had prepared text ready, we were never able to find a suitable date. This thesis and the empirical data used is not connected in any way to Telenor Norway or Telenor Myanmar and never have been since I was clear on separating the two projects from the beginning. Even though a project with Telenor never became a reality, I am grateful for my visa, for the insights I gained through the collaboration and pleasant conversation from the Telenor employees both in Yangon and Oslo. Through contacts from Yangon, I was able to present an early analysis of my data at a workshop called *Migratory Models in Myanmar* in October 2018 at the University in Konstanz, Germany. This workshop was financed by the Center of Excellence 16: Cultural Foundations of Social Integration, University of Konstanz. During these days, I gained insight

into other current research from different disciplines as well as good feedback for further reflections on my work.

Reflecting notes

With all ethnographic work, it is essential to recognize that they have particular limitation and that the ethnographer gained her or his information in a particular context that produces the specific outcome of the situation. As mentioned earlier, how I look and where I am from affected the situations I entered and how people could look at me, how they talked, and what they talked about with me. My interests have affected which people I got in touch with and what kind of data I collected. Therefore, my collection of informants consists of people with sound technical knowledge and understanding and often would have opinions of how things should be. Their attitudes and the information they told me would color my view as well, and even though I aim at not choosing a particular side throughout the thesis, my understanding is to some extent affected by one side of the narrative. The argumentation could have looked different if I had a different selection of informants, and I would probably not have a chapter quite as technical as chapter 4. I consider this chapter as important topic to address, but this is made possible through informants that had the competence and knowledge to elaborate it for me. In other conversations and group-talks, we could address fonts, but not in such detail and have a more focus on the sociality surrounding this technology.

This work focused on young adults living in Yangon. I can therefore not say with certainty that my findings are valid for every local user of all ages, all levels of English, and in all part of Myanmar. From my experiences and through the descriptions I received, it can be reasonable to assume that similar interpretations, experience, and challenges are accurate also in rural areas and for people of all ages. However, this claim is outside my range of informants and my information and would require extensive research focusing on rural areas and a decent level of Burmese language skills.

The thesis does not address and elaborate religion in Myanmar or Yangon other than acknowledging that the main religion is Buddhism and that this is a part of the frames in my field. During my fieldwork, I chose not to focus on religion specifically, but rather on the people and their relationship with the internet and smartphones. It could be interesting to see how the Buddhist faith would play out in this field, but with the thesis' limitations considering space, and without sufficient empirical data as support, this is not explored further.

Buddhism was forever present during my fieldwork, and I have not ignored religious aspects, but I do not consider my informant's faith as significant to be able to discuss my topics throughout the thesis.

Chapter 3.

“Myanmar – The Land of Gold and Dust”

With its valuable soil in northern areas containing valuable gem-stones and gold, its golden pagodas all around the country often beautifully decorated with rubies and jade, it is easy to forget that Myanmar is a developing country today. Dry sand and dust traveling with the wind in a burning heat and streets covered in the garbage is, however, a reminder. Everywhere from the thousand sand-pagodas in Bagan, between the tofu-stations in the markets, over the fishermen’s doc in Inle Lake, to the roads of Yangon, the contrast is ever present. It accrued to me that Myanmar is, in reality, land of gold and dust, not only through materials. In Yangon, the elaborate golden decorations, older decayed buildings, and big luxury shopping malls with forever open spaces for rent and few customers are hard to miss. Myanmar’s history is rich and complex, and with as many contrasts as seen in the country’s surroundings while walking the streets.

In this thesis, I will focus on Myanmar’s biggest city, Yangon. This is the city where I conducted my fieldwork, and this is the place where many of today’s challenges are apparent. To be able to discuss and gain an understanding of my research questions, it is essential to have some insight into the country’s historical background. This chapter will, therefore, introduce my field site, as well as Myanmar’s historical context.

Figure II – Thingyan, April 2018. Photo: Private



Yangon

With her soaking wet, purple patterned longyi, Hla walks towards the stage smiling happily. It is April, the sun is burning hot from a blue sky, and it is Thingyan, the yearly water festival. Every street in Yangon are packed with people, all soaking wet, all with buckets of water or water guns, laughing happily with big smiles, no matter their age. It is not a dry spot to detect in front of Sule Pagoda and Maha Bandula Park, which is packed with people. Through the music from the stage, massive water guns create rainbows under the burning sun. It feels like standing in light rain, without an umbrella, it has a pleasant cooling effect. On the stage in front of the City Hall, Hla watches the local dancers performing traditional dances to familiar Burmese music. She enjoys this temporary and glorious chaos.

To flee the city during the week of Thingyan is prevalent and bus tickets are sold out weeks ahead. In Yangon, most of the stores close down, and the streets consist of the chaos of people and cars getting nowhere. The rush traffic Hla typically complains about is nothing compared to this; it can take hours to get from one point to another, and even inside the cars you are not safe from the water. Both private- and taxi drivers cover their interior with plastic so that they can stop at numerous water-stations, roll down their windows and get cold water thrown on them and their passengers. Just a few years ago it was safe to walk in the smaller streets in Yangon to keep a bit dry, but these days the festival is in every street imaginable. Even right outside the apartment, the first thing Hla received today was a bucket of cold water over her shoulders from her heartwarmingly laughing neighbor. Luckily, as one should, she had her valuables such as cash and her smartphone in a waterproof case around her neck. It is almost like a fashion statement during the festival, to have these waterproof cases, preferably a colorful one visible. She does understand why many people travel to the calmer cities of Bagan or Mandalay during the festivals, but Yangon is much fun as well. Especially for the youth.

The day before, together with some friends, she rented an open car and drove around in the streets. They filled the back of the car with large buckets of water and more beer than they were able to drink. Like many others, they were dancing, throwing water at people passing by while being stuck in traffic. The water is supposed to be cleansing from the past year so that one will enter the new year fresh and ready to do good. Because of this, Hla and everyone else welcomes the cold water, as well the lovely cooling effect it has. It is after all April, one of the hottest months in the year, and Yangon feels somewhat closer to the sun than usual. The chaos of happy people, all soaking wet, the bright sun, and alcohol are marvelous.

Hla turns around and pushes herself out of the crowd to go for a walk, relaxing a bit. Playing with some of the kids on her way, she, like many others, looks forward to the normal Yangon again. The familiar Yangon with teashops on every street corner surrounded by the smell from local curries and rice, umbrellas to once again cover for the sun, and the smell of chewed betelnut in the air and red stains in the street. Walking past the gigantic red old brick-building called The Secretary, she looks through the closed fence. This building was the central administrative spot for the British when they ruled Myanmar, at the time called Burma, until they left the country in 1948. Afterward, it was used by the Burmese government and military junta who took power in 1962 (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2013). The building was later used until 2005, when the Burmese government chose to move the capital city to a new town that they built in just a few months, Naypyidaw. Naypyidaw is now the administrative capital, even though most of the tourist that visit Myanmar still thinks of Yangon as the capital.

The Secretary was left without any maintenance, as it decays the building keeps a whole block in the middle of the city unused. Hla has only been inside the fence a few times during the one day of the year when they open it for a photo exhibition. The building is much older than she is, and she does not talk about the history of this place. This is the building where General Aung San was shot in 1947 after he had been an essential contributor to the negotiation with England to become an independent country. He was part of building the modern military and wished for Myanmar to become a democracy. General, or as he is called locally; Bogyoke Aung San is by many looked upon as “the father” and is highly respected throughout the country.

His daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, has continued her father’s work, and after a long and still ongoing fight for democracy, she became the state counselor. With her two British-born sons from her time studying in England, she is not allowed to receive the title “President.” Aunt, or Daw, Suu Kyi returned Myanmar in 1988, during the great student rebellion. She did not know at the time that this would lead to, amongst others, a total of 15 years in house arrest. The Nobel Peace Prize she received in 1991 was another recognition she could not anticipate. Daw Suu Kyi gained the position she today holds alongside her political party NLD (National League for Democracy) (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2013; Rønneberg, 2015). However, all of this was before Hla was born, and the politics and government of Myanmar she rarely talks about. Hla’s work puts her in a position where she gets to develop her English skills and is more exposed to debates and news from outside her country. She works at a tech-hub and has

a more accurate picture than most locals regarding the technical problems the society faces. It is more common than before amongst young people in their early 20's to learn about and work with these issues and technology in Yangon.

Walking further Hla looks down the street to her right and spots Strand road with the famous Strand hotel. This hotel was opened in 1901 by the British and faces the Yangon river. At the time, it was the most luxurious place in town, and the British had one of their clubs in this building. During the time, up until 1993 when it re-opened after renovations, it was used as a headquarter for the Japanese during the WWII, Burma economic development corporations before it was sold in 1989. As with The Secretary and most of the other buildings from the British era, which is most of downtown, the Strand Hotel was left to decay until it was bought and renovated. Today it is once more one of the more luxurious places to stay in Yangon. The rest of the buildings has not experienced a similar faith, as Downtown Yangon is mostly represented by “once upon a time” beautiful, intricately decorated, but now decayed buildings. With streets in straight lines with columns and names starting at 1th street going up to 64th street, makes downtown is reasonably easy to navigate. The buildings appear to be left to themselves, even though the buildings are inhabited today.

Downtown Yangon is a unique place with a mix of different cultures, religion, and ethnic backgrounds. Outside Yangon, there are several conflicts between different groups of people, and especially the Muslim population had to face struggling times. However, in downtown Yangon, the situation is a bit different. The area around the famous 19th street is called Chinatown. There are Chinese decorations, alongside the Burmese bbq-streetfood. This street is a popular backpacker-street where Hla often gets an opportunity to speak with foreigners. However, most of the time, it is mostly local teenagers and young adults enjoying beers, cheap drinks, and a bit overpriced food. Around Sule Pagoda further up the street, there are both churches, mosques, and temples in just a few minutes walking distances. The big teashop and street food market next to Maha Bandula Park and the independence monument is popular amongst the locals. Every morning, as she walks past the Maha Bandula Park Hla would see locals doing their exercises, often there is dancing, yoga or other activities, but always before the sun gets too high and the heat sets in.

The most impressive monument is the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, a bit further north of downtown. It is an enormous golden pagoda stretching 100 meters in the air, decorated with gems and statues all around and is considered one of the four most important religious places in the

country. Placed on top of the hill, it can be seen from almost every part of the city. The Shwe Dagon Pagoda is an instant reminder of the great kingdom Myanmar once were. The fact that it remains untouched from robbery and other schemes reflect the importance of pagodas, and Buddhism in general, amongst the people and politicians. With the pagoda so easily seen, it blends into the skyline, and Hla hardly notices it any longer. She feels a bit hungry and walks past several international restaurants, such as *Pizza Company* or *Lotteria*, but she is not up for it. Pizza and burger taste weird to her; she much more prefers the local cuisine with curries and rice or an excellent fresh *mohinga*, a local noodle soup. She eats her Mohinga and heads home, Hla is tired and longs for a bit relaxation before the last party of Thingyan and a new year.

She pulls out her smartphone, scrolls through her Facebook-feed and newspaper headliner from a foreign country might show up. With her work and extensive English skills, she might then read headliners such as; “Facebook bans Myanmar army chief, others in unprecedented move” (Slodkowski, 2018), “Revealed; Facebook hate-speech exploded in Myanmar during Rohingya crisis” (L. Hogan 2018), “Why Facebook is losing the war on hate speech in Myanmar” (Stecklow, 2018b). Her attention turns to family and friend’s updates in the feed, as most people would focus on as well.

Nevertheless, what happened with Myanmar and Facebook? How come these headlines exist? Moreover, how does the immediate access to Facebook and international news change the playing field for political and everyday life? To be able to understand this, we need to have a closer look at the historical background of the country, and how everything leads up to this “digital crisis.”

The Rise of The Military Regime

The British colonial heritage is easily recognized in downtown Yangon. When the country in 1948 was considered independent, the country faced one on the most significant challenges after the monarchy collapsed in 1885 (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2013, p. 225). According to their description, the new minister, U Nu, needed to find a way for all the different ethnical groups to unite among one leader. This challenge eventually grew into a civil war, and U Nu’s government did not hold any real power outside the borders of the at the time capital, Yangon. During U Nu’s government, he had to manage the civil war, and at the same time re-build the infrastructure. Yangon was severely damaged during the air raids conducted by the Imperial Japanese Army Air Service during WWII. To be able to do so, he looked to foreign countries

for help, without much luck. U Nu worked actively with connecting the government closer to Myanmar's Buddhist background, and he did receive support amongst the locals. However, minority groups such as Christians, Muslims, and communists felt threatened by this direct connection with Buddhism and the government, and their choice to make Buddhism the official state religion. Additionally, U Nu built 80 000 sand pagodas, and amongst them; a World Peace Pagoda. This "Buddhist-propaganda" did not help control the rebellions amongst minorities and was therefore by some seen as unnecessary. Especially considering that between 80-90 percent of the country's residents already considered themselves as Buddhist. During this period, the military grew stronger and gained confidence. What could be perceived as "irrational" decisions like the Buddhism-propaganda, were not overlooked by the military for long (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2013, p. 247).

In 1958, the year that some consider as the first military coup, U Nu invited general Ne Win and his now strong army, to "clean up the mess" with an interim military government. This was considered as a "caretaker government." The military government managed to gain some structural order, and during an election in 1960, the civilian government with U Nu in front regained their power. However, almost simultaneously would the bickering and lawlessness in the urban areas increase once more. It did not take long until the military, with Ne Win, to return to power. Furthermore, this time, they were not "asked nicely." Already in 1962, under the name *The Revolutionary Council* (TRC), the military staged a coup d'état to regain the governmental power. This coup marks the beginning of a totalitarian rule and military-political dominance that would last for 26 years. They arrested a total of 50 leading figures, including U Nu, the former president. (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2013; Rønneberg, 2015) In 1966 they banned all other political parties, and TRC became one leading party of the country. This military rule had a significant impact on the country's development.

During the military coup in 1962, Myanmar residents did not rebel or protest against it; neither did other countries break diplomatic ties. It was even applauded in some foreign newspapers – amongst them, in India and Thailand. The majority welcomed the military party with Ne Win as the leading figure, and as the trusted torchbearer of Bogyoke Aung San's democratic ideology. Myanmar needed some structure, and there was a general understanding from the military circles that the civilian government were not able to control the continuous pressure and conflicts from both inside and outside the borders. The military, as is argued by some, "saved the nation" (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, pp. 246-248; Rønneberg, 2015).

In 1974, 12 years after the coup, TCR was replaced by a new political party; *Burma Socialist Program Party* (BSPP). This was, once more, with an intention towards a civilian government. BSPP is best described as a hybrid party, at first glance, it looks civilian, but it is not entirely so in terms of personnel distribution and control mechanism. However, it is not entirely military either, considering military principles and structure. BSPP kept the power up until the rebellion in 1988, the year Aung San Suu Kyi returned to Myanmar. This was the third time the military would reclaim control and power, this time under the same name as in 1958, *The State Peace and Development Council* (SPDC). During the next 23 years of government, the SPDC's focus was towards the idea of a "Pure" Burmese country. The idea was to build a modern and revolutionary state, but without any influence from the "outside." Acting policies as removing English education in kindergarden and making Burmese the official language, along with laws that made it illegal to oppose the government politically, and regaining structure, and control over rural areas, were part of their strategies. The government also banned western-style pageants, music/dance competitions and canceled external funding sources. (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2013; D. Miller & Sinanan, 2014)

With a policy focusing mainly in the rural areas, and peasants and agriculture, Ne Win realized a bit too late that the country's economy was in bad shape and that the government was not fit to handle the situation. Already in 1987, Myanmar was given the status; Least Developed Country (LDC) by the UN³. The riots in 1988 put Myanmar back on the map internationally, and the media coverage of the country increased. During this riot, with the triggering cause represented by bickering on a teashop between the owner and a student, extreme methods of violence were conducted, from both sides. It was an all or nothing situation, and some have argued that democracy was not the *cause* for this rebellion, but a *consequence*. (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, p. 258) At the time, the internet was strictly controlled by the government, and too expensive for most to afford, Myanmar became a country without much access to the outside world.

The new government, after the rebellions, once more military, was named *the State Law and Order Restoration Council* (SLORC). In a sense, Myanmar now returned to a similar situation as in 1962. SLORC declared martial law, arrested thousands of people, mostly political prisoners and amongst them Daw Suu Kyi, and renamed the country Burma to "Myanmar." After the riots in 1988 and the creation of SLORC, for the first time in a long time, another

³ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/least-developed-country-category-myanmar.html>

political party would grow as well, *The National League for Democracy* (NLD), with Daw Suu Kyi, General Aung Gyi and Tin U as leading figures. This political party now is in the sitting government (2018).

An election was not accomplished until 1990, with a tremendous victory to NLD. However, the military government chose to ignore this fact. SLORC, which yet another time renamed themselves to SPDC (State Peace and Development Council), ruled a country with several conflicts. This led to yet another vital riot in 2007, famously called *The Saffron Revolution*. This demonstration gained its name from the saffron-colored rope monks wear since the monks joined the people in the streets for peaceful walks. During this demonstration, Daw Suu Kyi had her first public appearance since 2003, and she was still under house arrest. In this *Saffron Revolution*, cellphones became essential tools. They made it easier to plan demonstrations and walks and made it possible to get information out of the country. Videos still exist on youtube.com from this demonstration. (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2013; Rønneberg, 2015)

At the time, there were few phones in circulation, most of them hidden in monk's robes and most of them illegal. The government had strict regulations for sim-card distribution and controlled the only company that was legal in Myanmar, MPT. One sim-card could cost as much as 200\$, and internet access was not widely accessible (Naithy Cyriac, Shin Thant, & Khine Yi, 2018). As a result of this usage of phones during the demonstrations it just took a few days for the government to shut down the connections, leaving everyone out of service and unable to get more information beyond the borders. Luckily, the information they did manage to send out was enough to get international attention towards the country and the government (Bergren & Bailard, 2017; Jacobi, 2011).

Myanmar Since 1988

Today the situation is very different. Since Myanmar, because of the military regime, was so closed off and did not focus on international relations, it still has weak connections today. The country still struggles with conflicts in the border areas, especially north in Kachin state to the Chinese border and in Rakhine state next to Bangladesh and India. Myanmar is a country which inhabits different ethnic groups such as Shan, Kayin, Mon, Chin, and Kachin, and numerous different languages. The Rohingya conflict has been developing since the deadly attacks on the Rohingya-villages in 2012, resulting in more than 140 000 Rohingya fleeing their homes, mostly to Bangladesh (Rønneberg, p. 211). Later in this thesis, I will address this

crisis as a case since it has a close relation to Facebook and the headings Hla could see in her Facebook feed. I will, however, not go into details of the Rohingyas, since it is not relevant to this argument. It is still essential to recognize that the Rohingya case has earned substantial international interest and is part of the reason Myanmar have had problems getting improved connections and relations to western countries. (Rønneberg, 2015)

Part of the conflict is due to that Buddhist militant groups claim that the Rohingya people are not truly Burmese, but rather from Bangladesh. These groups do not use the word “Rohingya” but instead calls them “Bengali” to express that the Rohingya people are foreigners from Bangladesh and conducted land grabbing in Rakhine state. Rohingya people have no citizenship and are considered one of the most discriminated groups in the world. In March 2018 a senior UN human rights official declared the Rohingya crisis as an “ethnic cleansing”⁴.

As a result of this isolation, the country has received even more sanctions, like a higher cost for student visas. In the US, the student visas for a Burmese student staying in the USA the price tag quadrupled in April 2018 (Goldberg, 2018), this means that it is harder for the population to travel abroad and receive higher and better education. The political situation has changed as well after the election in 2015, and NLD, with Daw Suu Kyi in front, is the political party that is voted to run the country. Daw Suu Kyi is named first state consular and functions as a *de facto* leader, with Win Myit as her president since March 2018. However, the military still holds the real power. Before the election, during the development of the new laws, they made sure to reserve 25% of the seats in the parliament for military representatives. To be able to get anything involving change through 75% of the votes or more is required. As a result, nothing happens unless the military generals agree (Rønneberg, p. 207).

Smartphones to The People

During the military regime, one of the actions the government did to keep control were the limitation of internet and phone access. At the time it was only one company allowed to operate in the country, the local company *MPT*. As mention, the prices were so high that most people could not afford a sim-card or to visit internet cafes. It was not until 2013 that the government opened up and allowed two additional companies to access the Myanmar phone-

⁴ <https://ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22761&LangID=E>

operating market. In 2014 the Qatar based company *Ooredoo* and the Norwegian based company *Telenor* could deliver sim-cards to the population alongside MPT. The prices then made a huge leap down from 200\$ to 2\$ pr. Sim-card and this accelerated the connectivity throughout the country drastically. In just a few years, the number of sim-card raised from 1-3% and up to 101% compared to the population (Jan.2018) (Naithy Cyriac et al., 2018).

200\$ was an outrageous pricing for a Sim-card, way more than most people were able to afford. Today, some Burmese people see it as “status” to have an older MPT phone-number, because this would suggest that you, at the time, could afford to have a phone to that pricing. Arkar, one of my informants, told me that they would keep the old MPT sim-card and use it as the contact number, and then have other sim-card by Telenor or Ooredoo to buy cheaper data packages. Another result is that Burmese people do not have phones - they have smartphones. This is a big leap for the Burmese population, going from next to no internet access and straight to full access through the phone in their pockets.

There have been several studies done on mobile phones, internet access, immediate access to the internet, and so forth. There has not been, however, anything specific done in Myanmar yet, as far as I know. The field is still “fresh” and is evolving rapidly, which allows us to follow the development carefully. In Myanmar, with its complex historical background and ongoing conflicts, immersed together with immediate access to the internet, several interesting cases are represented. This thesis address some cases, such as the use of the internet, or Facebook, to spread a specific narrative, relationships that gain a new dimension of space to evolve, new information to process and learn how to read critically. Moreover, of course, the complex issue of Burmese data script development, encoding systems Unicode and Zawgyi, or fonts as I will call them in this thesis. This particular issue I will dig deeper into and discuss in the chapter *The Battle of the Fonts*.

As we know, few people had access to the internet until 2014, and this includes smartphones and phones in general as well. Now, however, it is common in Yangon to have access to a smartphone one way or another. From the total population of 53.61 million (Jan. 2018) there are 18 million active social media users, and a total of 53.98 million mobile connection, i.e., sim-cards. This is 101% of the population (Kemp, 2018).

The device is the main access point to the internet, with Facebook as the primary platform used to navigate “the internet.” Facebook’s mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected (Tettegah, 2016, p. 141).

A result from this mission is that Facebook offers a broad specter of functions, everything from games, stores, news and of course, connectivity. In Yangon, Facebook function as an *obligatory passage point* (Law & Callon, 1988) for the user to access the rest of “the internet.” Another potential reason for Facebook’s popularity is the pricing of sim-card and Wi-Fi-connection. Since internet-access through 3G is the cheap and stable option, most people have access through a smartphone rather than a computer. This again affects the way the internet is accessed, primarily since this smartphone very often is sold with Facebook pre-installed. If not, Facebook is one of the first things your seller will install in the store; it is also one of the first platforms one meets going online. It is almost as when all roads lead to Rome, all links on the internet lead to Facebook. Facebook has become ubiquitous to the extent that it is often mistaken as the entirety of the internet.

Internet was a strange and hard thing to wrap one’s head around in Myanmar before 2014, and it still is in many ways. It is still a very abstract concept, not only in Myanmar. We use the internet every day, but most would not be able to explain in detail how the internet functions. In Myanmar, they have an extra obstacle. Before 2014, only the people with a good income, the right contacts and/or a particular interest in the technology had internet access. This means that most people had their very first meeting with the internet not that long ago. Aside from this, even a “normal” smartphone or cellphone was hard to access, caused by the extreme pricing of the sim-cards set by the government. My friend Win explained to me how he had never seen a smartphone in real life until recent years, only in commercials. This is also reflected through the opening story with Dedan and how he told me about his first meeting with the internet, and how strange it all seemed at the time.

Chapter 4.

“The Battle of The Fonts”

During the fieldwork, I realized that there was a technical issue to address regarding Burmese digital script when researching the use of Facebook and the internet. After a while, I was introduced to two different fonts: Unicode and Zawgyi and was told that these two are not friends. Since most of my informants have a background with technology in some way or other, and because I have an interest in more technical parts of the technology, I spend some time trying to figure out what this talk of digital fonts was all about. What is the conflict between Zawgyi and Unicode? Is there even any conflict to talk about? Why is it oblivious for some and self-evident for others? What do these encode systems affect and how do they work? Moreover, how are they connected to Facebook?

These questions are complicated and include an explanation of several layers. To be able to give a proper answer, I need to explain the background of basic coding systems and how the coding itself functions. The historical context discussed in the earlier chapter is relevant as well since the government’s policy has restricted access to the internet and smartphones in general. In the end, everything is connected and affect each other in different, and sometimes unexpected ways. I had eventually gained some knowledge of the Unicode and Zawgyi conflict, the two encoding systems this chapter focus on, but I required some more information to be able to understand it properly. With little time left of my stay, I decided to gather a focus-group to gain some useful information regarding these fonts. The reactions I received asking about Unicode and Zawgyi was not as expected, and the conversation broadens my horizon. I realized that this has to do with more than just technical issues requiring specific knowledge, this conflict is intertwined into several aspects of social life and things I had already discussed with my other informants without realizing it at the time.

At the very last week of fieldwork, I gathered a focus-group with some local students. The intention was a conversation, or to observe a conversation, between the Burmese students who talked about the different topics, but specifically focus on fonts. I hoped to gain some more insights and information about topics considering Facebook and particularly the font issue. Eventually, I found myself in a tiny room, behind the reception, at a business school located inside a shopping mall. The secretary served some tea and energy drink, as is expected in Myanmar, and later on what I craved in the extreme heat, cold water. There was a little group of seven curious students waiting to enter the room. All of them had attended my lecture on basic research methods earlier that month and volunteered to be part of the

discussion. “To experience my research skills in real life and see if I did what I told them to do,” they joked. A total of four girls and three boys sat in front of me, cramped on the sofa and chairs, the room was a bit too small for our crowd. Some wore jeans, some used longyi, shirts, and t-shirts and one girl made a statement with her pink braces, a fluffy short skirt, and pink and blue stripes in her hair. I call her Chit. One thing they all had in common was the aura and representation of being bright and conscientious students. The next hour turned out to be very informative. After some light conversations, including nervous smiles and laughter from everyone, including myself, we got started with my main focus points.

The students did not understand my questions. *Encoding systems? Fonts? What is she talking about?* After some explanation, the students could confirm that they indeed knew about the conflict. However, it did not have any effect on their daily life. This was not something they talked or thought about. The one exception was Chit. She had used Unicode for several years, being an active user of Facebook and YouTube. Chit translated everything for her family and friends from Unicode using converter tools or simply sent screenshots of the written text, but in the end, she went back to Zawgyi. This was partly since the translation was challenging, and partly because of the new phone she bought had Zawgyi pre-installed. She would not bother to go through the process of changing the setting to Unicode, which could be a tedious one.

Background

The Burmese language is written with characters, the same way as many other languages like Chinese or Thai. Burmese is easy on the eyes with its round and circle-shaped forms, opposite from for example Korean script which consist of mainly square shapes. Burmese script is, like other character-based languages, written on different technological devices such as computers and smartphones. However, unlike most other languages, Burmese had and still has some struggles in this digitalization process. During the military regime, when Myanmar was closed off, only a few people were allowed access to the internet. This meant that most people lacked access to the internet, as well as phones and computers and were in some ways left out on the development of digital character-script. Win, a friend of mine, explained how during the military regime they were not even able to buy a phone. He wrote to me; “When I was 16, I couldn’t even see a mobile phone in real life... ..while neighborhood countries starting using

the internet, our people in Myanmar could not even buy a television or radio. The gap is huge.” Continuing the conversation, Win describes his country’s development as *lagging*⁵.

Today two different forms of character-script are used in Burmese digital written language; Unicode and Zawgyi. From this point on and further into the thesis, while talking about character script regarding digital language, I will use the word *font*. With a font, I refer to what is called an *encoding system*, the coded structure behind a digital script. The font is simply a more straightforward term and is recognized as a substitute for encoding system in articles and other work I refer to.

Unicode is a font that is recognized as an international standard. This means that different devices support it in different languages all around the world. A font is not language-specific since it is a system working with coding and decoding of text. Unicode, maintained by the Unicom Consortium, therefore commonly used by translation tools, and is through this aiming towards a seamless communication for digital text worldwide (Liao, 2017, p. 18). It would make perfect sense, then in Myanmar, to use Unicode, like most of the world. In Myanmar, however, while Unicode exists and is used by some people like Chit, it is more common to use another font called Zawgyi. Zawgyi was created in 2006⁶ before the Burmese Unicode was fully developed. This was supposed to be a temporary solution, but Zawgyi is now, as of 2018, the most commonly used font. This situation created a massive, still ongoing, challenge for everyone working with technology inside and outside the country’s borders.

The Zawgyi font is based on another, older, local version, of a digital script, Myazedi. Myazedi was created by Ko Ngwe Tun, at the time when Windows could not support intelligent rendering (reading) of the fonts. Ko Ngwe Tun organized and categorized each variation of every single character and gave it its code point⁷ (Hotchkiss, 2016). These locally created fonts do not function seamlessly with devices and internet platforms.

⁵ **Lag/læg**/(lags, lagging, lagged) verb: If one thing or person **lags behind** another thing or person, their progress is slower than that of the other. (Collins Cobuild, *Advanced Dictionary of English*, 2009)

⁶ At the time, it was not common to have internet or computer access, which means that only the wealthy and/or powerful had access and the need for a digital script. It was also common to write on typewriters and scan picture of the text to upload to blogs.

⁷ I will explain code points later in this chapter.

Hotchkiss⁸ (2016) explains that the Myazedi font had two main problems; it did not support the different languages, and it was costly to buy. Zawgyi was a much cheaper font to get a hold on and even free for downloads in some places. Naturally, Myazedi was not peoples first choice. The cost was also higher than what most companies could afford, which again opened up the initiative of piracy. Piracy is a well-known problem globally to software-downloads in general. Dedan once told me, after talking about Photoshop and Microsoft Word licenses, that even his company, which was a large company working with application development, used unlicensed software. “*Why to pay when we can get it for free?*” he said. This attitude towards licenses is something that I recognized with most of my contacts, and it is one of the reasons Zawgyi became so popular. When Zawgyi was released in 2006 it had a striking resemblance to Myazedi, Zawgyi-developers were forced to make some change for copyright reasons. These changes made the Zawgyi font even less compatible with the Unicode standard than what it already was (Hotchkiss, 2016). Simultaneously as the Zawgyi was released, the second version of Unicode in Burmese was released, *Myanmar2*. Already in December 2007, Unicode *Myanmar3* was released with substantial updates, now also supporting several of the different variations of languages in Myanmar (Lionslayer, 2012). Why do Burmese users not use Unicode then? When it is supposed to be an easier font to use, is an international standard that works on every platform, as well as supporting more variations of their many languages, something Zawgyi is not able to do?

Hotchkiss offers three main reasons for this. The first reason is the problems of getting Unicode to work with Windows, an issue that requires some knowledge and experience with technical configurations. Most people in Myanmar did not have this experience at the time, and most people still do not possess these skills and knowledge. The second reason is the blogs. It was prevalent to use Zawgyi while blogging, and the blogs often shared how to download and use Zawgyi, something that leads to broader use of the font. Hotchkiss final explanation is the successful news web portal, planet.com.mm. This page used Zawgyi and offered a free download of the font. Font embedding did not work at the time, i.e., the inclusion of font files in a document. These considerations, combined with the fact that there were new, smooth, ways of downloading the Zawgyi font, made it easy to use Zawgyi. What most people was unaware of, was that some of the downloaded software changed the keyboard setting, as it should do. However, some software simultaneously incorporated the

⁸ In this chapter several of the references are newspaper articles and blogpost due to a lack of literature exploring the font issue in Myanmar.

Zawgyi font as default on the device, without any easy option of changing this back to the original setting (Hotchkiss, 2016). This created a somewhat unfavorable situation that still today is a challenge to navigate. The result is that the central part of the Burmese- or other variation of the language-speaking population use Zawgyi, not Unicode, intentionally or unintentionally.

Understand The Battle

How do the fonts work, and why is this seen as a problem? As mentioned above, with a *font*, I refer to an encoding system for digital language characters. This system that I call font is a software that allows users to write in Burmese, or other variations of the language, on their devices. Unicode and Zawgyi are simply two different kinds of the font software. The fonts' name (Unicode or Zawgyi) can be explained as a description of the character's shape, while the encoding system itself (the "font") is the information of their order and rendering. To be able to change the device's text or encoding system that is, one must download a *font file*. The font file is installed and then changes the default settings in the keyboard in your device. The process of downloading and changing a device setting could be rather tedious and technical challenging if you do not have the right information and/or contacts⁹. As an example: My smartphone has both a Norwegian and an English font/software installed in my keyboard, and I can change it recording to my need. Unicode or Zawgyi would appear similarly on the device, but the way each of these fonts is built is different. In my smartphone, as mentioned earlier; a font is not language specific, both Norwegian and English is in Unicode. So, the given language lays on a different level in the structure if this process, while the font itself is the system rendering (reading) the letters. It is helpful to think of fonts as an infrastructure that functioning both in and with other infrastructures and systems at the same time and on different levels. I will discuss infrastructure more closely after explaining a bit more details around the technical issues with fonts.

When typing **ABC** on your device, **ABC** is the input from the keyboard. The keyboard uses a font software, as explained, and in an international device, it is most likely Unicode. Each letter or character is saved, *encoded*, into a file as a chain of numbers. These numbers are what we call *code points*. **A** have its specific set of code points, **B** has another, space and

⁹ I received the information regarding the installation process from Benedict Mette-Starke, University of Konstanz in January 2019.

commas have their own code points, and so on. This file, containing all the encoded code points, are then sent to the next device. The new devices' keyboard, the font installed, is then *decoding* these code points and recreates the **ABC** identical to what was typed on the first device. And in this way, you have shared a text, or a document containing text. This is a very simplified description of a font, how this system functions. The problem with Unicode and Zawgyi is that the two fonts do not encode (save), the code points in a similar way, neither do they decode (read) the code point the same way. The result then, is that if you try to open a Zawgyi file with a Unicode software, you will see a meaningless mess of a text. The two fonts cannot read each other. In order to ensure compatibility, it occurs a need to make a choice between Zawgyi and Unicode.

As an example, as seen in figure III, **A B C** has created code points in a device with Unicode font. These code points are saved as a file and then opened on a device with the Zawgyi font. The code points are now rendered different and the letters **A, B** and **C** will then appear different as well. This is an *extremely* simplified example of the coding process, but it is an illustration of the Unicode and Zawgyi issue. In Burmese characters the letters will not be upside down like in my example, but rather have different add-on's to the base character, the wrong character, sometimes just an empty box, a question mark, dotted lining or simply a blank or bold-lined space.

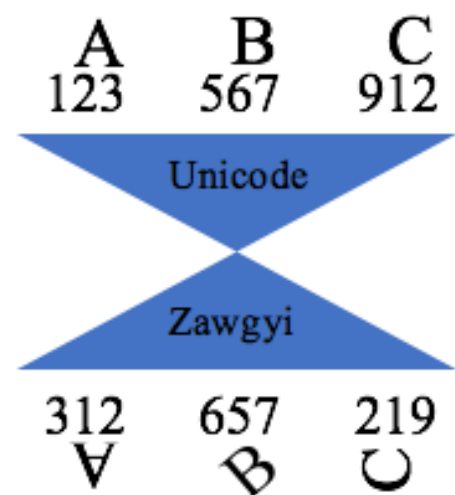


Figure III - Exemplified model of an encoding system

The font issue is a particular case that most people would not recognize in the beginning, including me. These systems of writing are a “hidden/invisible technology,” they work in the background without the users interfering or awareness of it. *It is just there; it just works.* When this hidden technology ceases to function as it should, you notice its significance. It is, however, too simple to explain fonts as something that is just there. This technology is one part of a bigger system that we can think of as a set of infrastructures. An infrastructure can be explained as a set of system that builds relations between things and people. You cannot limit infrastructure to static material structures, such as water pipes, buildings or roads, it is also something that facilitates projects, expand and flows, standardizes distributions, and extend political rationality. An infrastructure works within several layers and together with other infrastructures (Appel, 2015). It is easy to recognize this in the fonts. They are just one part of

a bigger system that makes it possible to write, read and communicate in Burmese on technological devices; it is a system that flows seamlessly until something does not, something goes wrong, the infrastructure is faulty. In this case, the break between the use of Zawgyi and Unicode is where the infrastructure collapses.

Appel refers to philosopher Heidegger to explain how infrastructure can be distinguished as visible and invisible. Heidegger's hammer is a tool to think with, differentiated by "ready-to-hand" and "present-at-hand." The hammer is a tool used in everyday life; something one simply is unaware until you need one. It is "ready-to-hand" when everything is in order, and you do not really think about it, it is invisible. The hammer becomes "present-at-hand" when something breaks or needs to be fixed; it is suddenly visible. They argue that the tool can be a "theory machine," so when the hammer is visible, it is also visible to thought and science for theorizing the ubiquity of infrastructure (Appel, p. Introduction).

I would suggest that the font issue reflects the ubiquity of the fonts as infrastructure; it is everywhere at once without always being recognizable. The battle between Zawgyi and Unicode can be compared to Heidegger's Hammer. They were invisible until it became a problem of legibility and awareness arose. As with the accretion of infrastructure, the fonts coexist amidst a multiplicity of infrastructural forms and as such have both multiple and incomplete effects. Further, into this thesis the reader will recognize how this issue is somewhat present-at-hand without explicitly being talked about. This is an underlying issue or choice in every case of communication when a technological device is used. It is not something one needs to address every day, sometimes not at all, since something or someone else have made it ahead of time, and it works, so you use it.

The screenshot (figure IV) is an example of how a typical Facebook post would look on my computer, which uses the Unicode-font. The first section in the post is written with Zawgyi and is more or less unreadable on my device. The second part is in English and the last one, Unicode. It is easy to see that Unicode is readable on my device, while Zawgyi is not. This is why most post with Zawgyi first would say "Unicode and English below", so that people reading would scroll down and read the section their device can render adequately, or English if the person can understand it. On a device with Zawgyi installed it would have been the opposite, and Unicode would be unreadable on the device.

When Does the Font Become a Problem?

As a participant in the original group starting the initiative campaign *Break the Silence: Ask for Zarni* working against sexual harassment in the bar scene of Yangon, I was able to see the influence of Zawgyi. With time, as the campaign grew more prominent and gained followers through Facebook, the group was forced to think about proper Burmese translations. The campaign group had both local Burmese participants as well as foreign people like me. We aimed to include everyone in the Yangon bar-scene, locals as well as foreign people. Our local participants, working with the translations, spent a long time to get the text right, and they would talk about Unicode and Zawgyi. At the time, I was unaware of the size of the problem with these fonts and did not recognize it while listening to their discussion. I was, however, about to learn something fundamental. It turned out that our post needed to be in three parts/translations, one in Zawgyi, one in Unicode and one in English, as seen in figure IV.

When we had the setup in our Facebook post in the following order: *English – Unicode – Zawgyi* and *Unicode – Zawgyi – English*, we mainly got attention and participation from foreign people. Aiming for more local participation, it was a challenge to figure out how we could reach them. We did indeed have Burmese text on top, why was it not gaining any momentum? The problem turned out to be that we started with the Burmese Unicode on top and not Zawgyi. As it was the western participants that posted from their computers, it was

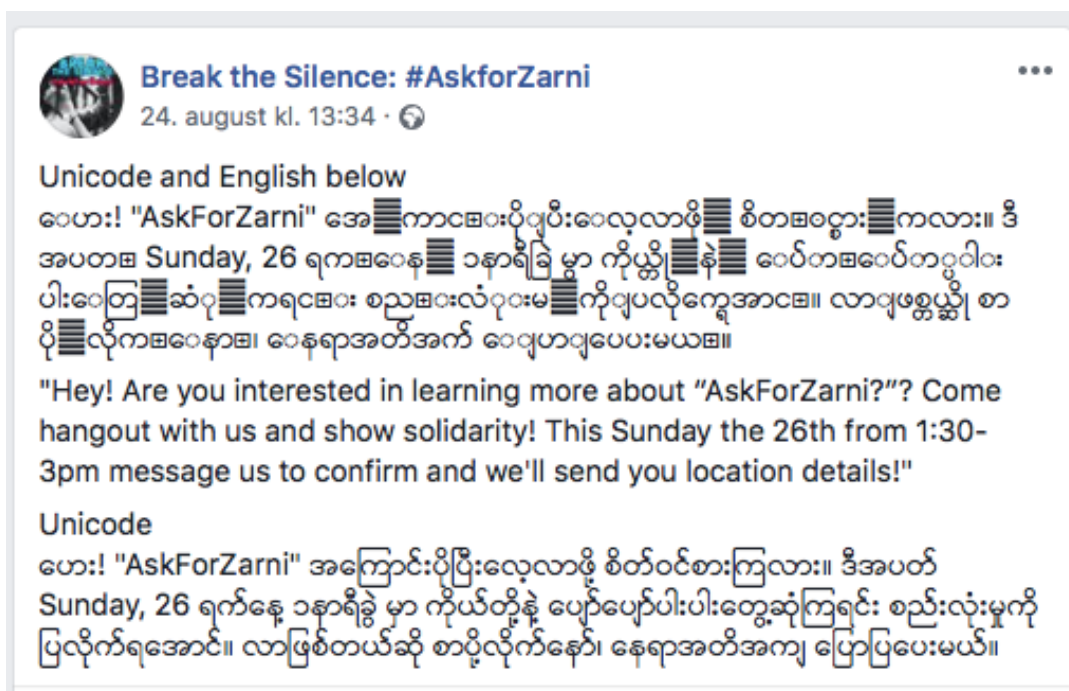


Figure IV – Screenshot from my Facebook feed, August 2018

natural to have what looked correct for them on the top, which was Unicode, as seen on my computer. None of us thought that our computers or smartphones were any different from the other locals, at the time we, the foreigners, were unaware of the font issue. Our local group members did not, in the beginning, recognize the fonts as part of the problem either. As soon as we changed the order to *Zawgyi – English – Unicode*, after the local member's suggestion, we had almost only local participants. This was the exact opposite outcome from earlier posts when we mostly had foreigners responding. The response to this seemingly small change, could not be a pure coincidence.

After some more research in this field, I am now able to explain how this could be the case. First and foremost, starting with English, you attract foreign people, since they use English as their first language abroad. It is common that Burmese people do not speak or read English, so that is one obvious obstacle. To start the post with Unicode then has almost the same effect as with English since most people use Zawgyi, which means that Unicode is as foreign as English to look at. It is merely tough to understand the characters since the fonts decode them differently, as shown in figure III and IV. To start with Zawgyi, then, is the best option if your goal is to reach out to local users since it is the font that most people can read and communicate through. It could be that simple, once you are aware of this issue. This explanation is not, however, sustainable to continue the use of Zawgyi. Zawgyi is a more complicated font to write with and entails restrictions considering optional characters and languages. Unicode has a rendering system that is capable of working on an international level and allows the use of the different languages in Myanmar (Liao, 2017). From understanding the technical challenges, in this case, it is essential to recognize that there are several layers to this issue and that it cannot only be explained through the technical rendering of the fonts.

Explaining the Taste of a Poem

As explained earlier, Unicode is seen by people working with or have an interest in technology as the better option between the two. It is an international standard that most devices have pre-installed, and you do not need to download and change anything. It supports variations of languages, and it is compatible with Internet platforms such as Google, Facebook, Twitter and operating systems like Windows, Mac, and Linux as well as smaller devices as mobile phones. With Zawgyi, either you or the company producing the devices/software/platforms need to take some action to use Zawgyi. Why then, when Unicode is allegedly better, have not the change been made? Why do people continue to use Zawgyi? I

referred to Hotchkiss, that gave us some suggestions referring to different technological challenges and opportunities as an explanation for Zawgyi's success. However, it is more than these technical obstacles to tackle, and I would like to aim at an understanding of why my most local users prefer Zawgyi rather than Unicode. With the knowledge from my informants telling me how the technical understanding is low, they are simultaneously showing me that there is more to explore in this issue. Alongside the technical suggestions, I will now discuss the surrounding social and communicative issues.

When the people around you, the people you wish to have communication with on a day to day basis use Zawgyi, you use Zawgyi as well. It is an explanation as simple as a convenience, amongst others. We saw this earlier with Chit, she started to use Unicode but ended up with Zawgyi. Thura, a local friend working in a big technological start-up company, was the first person that explained the whole issue to me. Due to the complexity and technical sides of this, I wanted to make sure I understood it correctly and was allowed to tape the conversation. We had a private room at the office and had been talking about other things a while before I asked more about the subject of fonts, a bit confused by this whole thing. Thura leans back into his chair and looks calmly at me over the edge of his glasses. He starts;

“Zawgyi was developed while Unicode was not fully developed for Myanmar language, so they [the government] decided to invent their own computer language to be able to type in Myanmar on the computers... ..that was the time when we were closed of the world, it doesn't really matter [if it worked outside Myanmar], we developed our own system”.

Taking some calm breaths between his sentences and tasting his words, he continues to explain that when Unicode finally was ready around 2007, there was no enthusiasm to use it. Why should it? At the time, they had no interest or connections to the outside world. Now, the problems emerge together with the introduction of the internet, Facebook and access to and interest of “the outside world”.

After my conversation with Thura, I realized that aside from the technical and political reasons (see chapter 6.) behind Zawgyi's popularity, day to day issues float to the surface. When you write something on a social media platform, it would be natural to suggest that you want people to read and respond to it. As Nicholas A. John writes; “On social media, and in other digital contexts, sharing means distributing, telling others... ..and certainly not keeping it to yourself” (John, 2017, p. 149). If you use Unicode, others using Zawgyi would not be able to communicate with you. The same will be the case if you want to read what others write. Different use of fonts makes this a big challenge. This means that even though some

people want to make the change towards Unicode, they are forced to use Zawgyi to be able to communicate properly.

Win turned out to be a good interlocutor for discussing everything from religion, food, education, and everyday life. After my return to Oslo, we kept in contact, and one day, we started to discuss these fonts. Win works offshore with foreign people (mostly Asian origin) and often travels with work. He does see the need to make the change to Unicode. Win described his frustration to me writing; “It’s like telling the taste of a poem to the people who only know alphabets.” This quote captures the essence of a lot of the frustration amongst the pro-Unicode group.

There is not only the convenience of communication that is reproducing Zawgyi. Larger corporate companies also play a big part. In Myanmar, which is a developing country, most people would not afford phones from exclusive companies that as Apple and the more expensive Samsung models. People in Myanmar, as we know, did not have access to internet and phones until 2014, but then the market growth accelerated. Naturally, phone companies wished to gain shares of the market, and the result is that cheaper Asian phones are common amongst local users today. Huawei, Oppo, Samsung, and other Asian-based companies are the largest distributors in the country. One of the steps companies made to gain market-shares was to deliver phones with Zawgyi pre-installed as default, sometimes offering Unicode as an option (Liao, 2017). This is still the case today. Facebook is also supporting both Unicode and Zawgyi, and as we already know, Facebook is often considered as “the internet.” In supporting both, they do not force their users to choose between the fonts. Business-wise Facebook would lose most of their users if they removed the Zawgyi-support. Thura explained to me how Facebook would not stop supporting Zawgyi; “they don’t wanna do it because they would lose all their accounts, like lose all their customers.” This means that at some level, someone else chooses others, without them being part of the decision or even aware of it. The default font is one example and pre-installed Facebook another. It is then reasonable to suggest, as is common amongst STS-scholars, that technology, at some level, always is political.

Two main points can be drawn, we know what made Zawgyi so popular, but how did Facebook grow so big? New phones are commonly delivered with Facebook pre-installed, or they install it in the shop before you leave. During my fieldwork, I bought two different phones, one Oppo and one Huawei, both times they unwrapped the phone in the shop and proceeded to install Facebook, Messenger, and Zapia if they were not already in the device.

These applications are mostly installed from local files already stored in the device. The typical Apple store and Play store that you otherwise would use for this function are delivered in Chinese or Thai, which most people in Myanmar do not read or understand. Locally saved applications and files are then shared through an application named Zapia, which is a Bluetooth-based application for sharing. This pre-installed software and Zapia-functions are part of the reason Facebook grew so big in Myanmar. As already addressed, there is no sufficient alternative to Facebook's opportunities that include all the functions in one place. If such an alternative existed in Myanmar, there is no apparent reason to continue the use of Facebook instead of the other option. Another factor maintaining Facebook's popularity is, as mentioned that they do not make their users choose between Zawgyi and Unicode. They support both, and it, therefore, depends on your installed software which font is readable on your particular device. (As shown in figure IV). Another reason why Facebook is so dominant is the fact that the smartphone is people's main access to the internet, and Facebook is then used instead of the browser-applications, offering a sufficient amount of functions.

Wenche Nag, in the book *Stretched Connectedness*, draws on Giddens when she explains the terminology of structuration. She writes that as social actors, we are intentional and that all action has a purpose. Often, we are aware of this, but we do not have complete information about all the different factors that influence a specific outcome. There is always information or influence present that you do not know about, as could be the case with pre-installed Zawgyi. This means that whenever someone has to make a choice, this choice is based on incomplete information, you can never put forward every single influence behind your choice (Nag, 2017, p. 74). There are some similarities to infrastructure theory in this, with all the layers working together, in all the different systems needed to get something to work/function or all the different influence forming in one way or another, aware or unaware, the outcome. Much like the choice between Unicode and Zawgyi, this is true both to everyday life, as well as competing companies taking action like delivering products with Zawgyi default. Structural resources are used to facilitate action, and this action may serve to both reproduce as well as change the structural resources. This involves power relations and then the power to influence others, as can be seen when looking at Facebook in Myanmar when they support both font-alternatives.

As Liao writes "New users in Myanmar *unknowingly* became part of Zawgyi's existing user base, without knowing the hidden costs that will impede the future of Myanmar's digital society to be sustainable and inclusive" (Liao, 2017, p. 21). Giddens two terms of power,

authoritative- and *allocative power* are then visible in this process. Authoritative power he refers to the government controlling what and who can enter and work in the country, opening and closing the borders, when the people have access, so on and so forth. Allocative power is then the companies controlling the devices sold and the software they are delivered with, at the end affecting the outcome and position of Zawgyi. These forms of power will be reproduced in cycles of structuration in which the participating actors (people using Zawgyi) will be as important as the dimensions of resources (the government and the companies) (Stones, 2005, pp. 73-74). This tells us that there is a form of structuration and different forms of power-levels traceable in Yangon today.

Who Wants to Make the Change?

It is now clear how Zawgyi holds its positions amongst users, and why. As mention earlier, there are people, like Chit, who wants to use Unicode. Who are these people? What is their motivation for using Unicode rather than Zawgyi? Win's quote about the taste of a poem captures the essence of the frustration among most pro-Unicode people I talked to; the lack of experience, the closed off-ness, the anti-globalization politics from the government and all the technical and practical sides of the problem that have already been discussed. We also know that many people are not aware of or do not think about this issue at all. Nonetheless, many people from different backgrounds are waiting for a satisfying solution to make a change for everyone.

The pro-Unicode group consists mostly of people like Win, educated persons that work offshore, or Chit who attends a business school or Thura, who is educated within technology and innovation. Several examples could have been mentioned, with these common character traits. There seems to be a link between higher education and the wish to make a change to Unicode. Most of my contacts who already communicate with foreigners, like myself, see the benefits of using Unicode and how it would simplify processes in everyday life as well as in working life. This includes people working within development, particularly technological development like programmers and/or people who have a specific interest in technology, like my friend Dedan. Through conversations, my impression is that most local

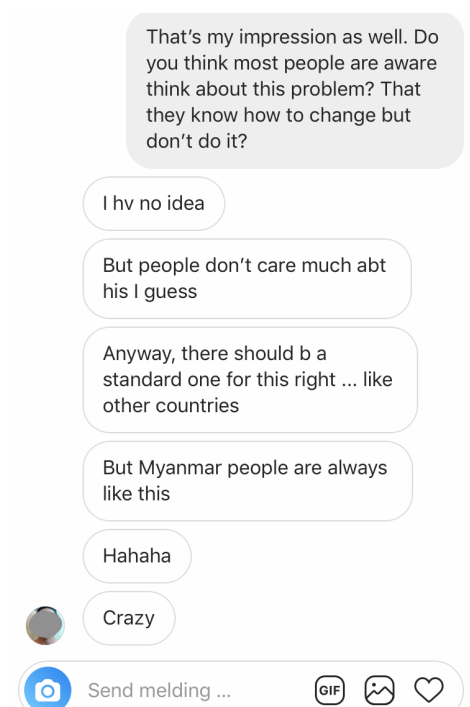


Figure V – Conversation with Win, April 2019

people who engage with foreign people regularly, without direct connection to the categories mentioned above, have more awareness of the issue and are, in principle, pro-Unicode. From what I am told, they would make the change if a solution were more accessible. Win describes in figure V how he wishes there was one standard, but that local users, as long as something functions not really make the change. As soon as a realistically and adequate solution enters the market it would be possible, something that is not in any near future as far as I know.

The government's position is something to consider this case. They could have done something earlier to avoid this problem. It could be tempting to judge and directly criticize the government, especially considering the historical context of the issue. In conversations with Dedan, he would often state with a careless attitude that; "ah, the government don't care, they do their stuff and don't care about these things." Win once told me the government was not able to handle the problem of the fonts, and they had never been. Thura presented a similar attitude to me. These kinds of statements were never a surprise; I received them regularly from different kinds of people. There have been other countries encountering this issue, handling it early on, like Cambodia, where the government declared that everyone selling or distributing in the country needed to use the Khmer-Unicode. The issue was then solved (Hotchkiss, 2016). In Myanmar, however, the risk and inconvenience are too significant in doing so now. At the moment, people are too dependent on Zawgyi.

The government has taken some action, however, publicly saying that communication with governmental instances needs to be written in Unicode and that all statements and information are published in Unicode. They do encourage the local user to use Unicode, and the government is making some moves in that direction. There is, however, from what I have been told, still, Zawgyi that is mainly used in communication from a day to day basis, also inside the government. In using one consistent standard font, the government would likely have significant benefits regarding governmental data, legal proceedings, etc. (Liao, 2017). The problem is far from solved and *the battle of the fonts* is still a reality.

The above-mentioned pro-Unicode groups are not alone. As mentioned earlier, Zawgyi does not support the different languages inside the country, since the font does not render these automatically. In Zawgyi, you need to type the characters manually, and since you have access to limited numbers of characters on a keyboard, this can be difficult. Unicode supports all characters, and the rendering happens automatically, you save time and get the correct

spelling. Using Zawgyi means that when people that want to write in their language, like Karen, Chin or Shan-users, they need to adjust the characters. This means that they need to make something *close enough* to the original character using what is available. This problem is mainly caused by the way the Zawgyi font uses Burmese language characters when someone writes in Shan, or other languages, these languages have different characters (Liao, p. 20).

Unicode gives the proper character for the language. Zawgyi is, therefore, an obstacle in maintaining the proper writing of different languages in Myanmar. This was described to me as directly discriminating minority languages. To be able to communicate appropriately with your language is essential. Language is more than just a way to communicate with others; it also functions as identity markers and, through its pragmatic, it is a cultural institution (Laitin, 2000, p. 144). These personalities and identity markers are an essential part of day-to-day interactions in Myanmar. I experienced that whenever they greet a new person, they would talk about which area they originally come from and connect from this. During my language lessons, the different groups of people and areas they lived in were something that was emphasized. Traveling with Dedan, he would comment on the different styles of houses alongside the roads and show me how different groups build houses in their own, distinct styles. It is similar to traditional clothing. Visiting the university, Mimi and Pemala showed me paintings of people in their traditional clothing and told me about the different people in their country. When buying a Longyi at the market, you are always told of which part in Myanmar the pattern originated. From my experience, people in Myanmar take much pride in their cultural identities.

Everything considered it would seem strange that Zawgyi, then, is the most commonly used font. It is connected with what has been discussed earlier; lack of experience, convenience, and a common; “this works, why change it”-attitude; as illustrated when Win describes his frustration in Figure V. Earlier in this conversation, he also states that the government cannot handle the font problem. It is the taste of a poem-challenge, how it is challenging to try to describe it to someone that only know the letters. Often some do not need to know more than the letters. That knowledge is enough, it makes the day to day life, and there is really no need to be able to taste or feel the words, as long as you understand them. As long as Zawgyi allows communicating, even though it is far from perfect, why spend valuable time and money on something new and strange? Besides, the government has not made any substantial effort to speed up this process, which could be due to a political reason. Facebook, as it is in

today's Yangon, makes it possible to spread one specific narrative and propaganda throughout the country, something which I address in chapter 6.

Is There any Easy Fix?

Considering the extent of areas Zawgyi affect, there is no obvious way of managing it. The government could ban the use of Zawgyi all at once, but how would they manage to help everyone that needs help in this process to make the change practically? There would be an enormous logistic demand and technical challenge to manage such a big project. What would happen with the people that did not change, or do not have the opportunity to change? It would be realistic to fear a collapse if the government demanded such a thing on short notice. Other countries, like Cambodia with their Khmer language, have avoided this kind of issues in making one clear message early on encouraging people to use the Unicode-version of their language, and the whole situation was avoided. It seems like it is too late for Myanmar to do this now, it is just too big of a project and too big of a risk. Other governmental instances that have encountered this issue is The People's Republic of China, Hong Kong SAR government and the even UK, that all implemented the use of an encoding standard (font) that supports Unicode. This was done in consideration of the implementation of a better option and accurate information regarding E-Governmental procedures. (Liao, 2017, pp. 21-22)

Thura, working with technology and development did not have a positive outlook or suggestion, neither did Dedan or Win. All of them agreed that some kind of action needs to be put forward in this. Unicode should be the main font, but they do not know how it should be done. Moreover, as we know, a lot of other local users do not even think about this issue from day to day basis, it is a particular group with a special interest that is concerned with the issue.

As it is with technology, change happens quickly, and even after my return to Norway, there has been some development. *Yangon Connection* is a Facebook group that gathers mostly foreigners living in Yangon, as well as some local users, often working in international companies, renting out apartments to foreigners or so on. In this group issues or questions of all sorts are being discussed, and in

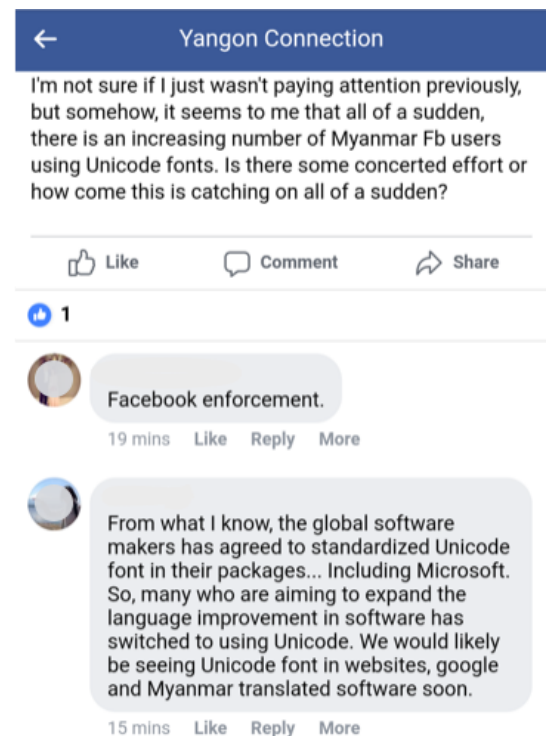


Figure VI – Screenshot from Facebook feed, February 2019

February 2019, a question regarding the fonts was posted. (figure VI) This is an example of how different participations in the market are slowly making a change, and how it is looked upon. One local user describes it as *enforcement* implying that Unicode is not something positive, but rather something forced, while the second local user uses the words *language improvement*. These two users can be said to represent the division amongst local users in Myanmar.

The issue of choosing a font is more than just a technical one. As we have seen, it is related directly to communication practices, access to information, and participation in a global society. Several people, alongside my informants, see an urgent need to make a change and to continue the effort of making Unicode the standardized font, also in Myanmar. With everything that comes with the fonts, the choice is not that hard to make. As Liao writes: “Knowing that choosing the right encoding [font] is, in fact, choosing who has access to the digital world and the opportunities offered there should provide the motivation” (Liao, 2017, p. 24). Considering how the problem has developed and transformed into a social issue as well as a technical one, there does not seem to be an obvious solution at the moment. As seen in figure VI, there are fragments of change, but it is not defined at which level this change is activated. If it is the infrastructural ways Facebook functions, a social phenomenon or from the government is uncertain, and it is an exciting field to continue to research in the time to come. This chapter has aimed at answering how Facebook gained its position in Yangon and how Facebook can keep this position, what happens in the society and how it affects my informants through a perspective of the battle of the fonts. Following, I explore the same questions through a perspective of emotions and affect.

Chapter 5.

“On Facebook is The Real Feelings”

When you have a smartphone in your pocket, you are always available, even when physically far away. Even though the concept of a smartphone is still quite fresh in Yangon, the *tethering* plays out in Yangon with huge similarities to the western world. My local friends were always on, they always had the phone with them, and they always answered within a short period. Walking around in the city, I would see smartphones in the back of a longyi - next to the wallet, or inside the knot in front of a male longyi, in people's pockets and purses, watching the local rickshaw-driver relaxing in the passenger seat enjoying videos without headphones, or the taxi driver with the smartphone safely in a phone mount. I once asked Dedan, while he wrote to his friends to meet us for some beers, how they planned these meetings before smartphones. Dedan then stopped writing, thinking long and hard and looked at me with a frustrated expression. He realized he did not remember at the moment, “I guess we planned ahead from each time we met up?”. At this point, it was only four years since they got access to smartphones, and already the people in Yangon is as entangled with the phone as, one can argue, the rest of the *online world* is, struggling to remember how things were done earlier without thinking hard about it.

In this chapter, I will explore online expressed feelings and emotions, and how they can play an essential role in the life of younger people. To be able to fruitfully discuss the affect, the emotions, and the feelings, I draw on Brian Massumi which writes of the autonomy of affect as of forces that flows through the body to materialize as emotion. He writes:

“An emotion or feeling is a recognized affect, an identified intensity as re-injected into stimulus-response paths, into action-reactions circuits of infolding and externalization: in short, into subject-object relations. Emotion is a contamination of empirical space by affect, which belongs to the body without an image” (*Welchman & Biennale of, 1996, p. 33*)

My interpretation and a distinction with this understanding are as follow; Affect is something hard to grasp, one does not always know of it and what it is, but the affect from something can still be present. Emotion is something one feels and is aware off; emotion is conscious and can as, therefore, be felt. A feeling, however, is something expressed. It can be an expressed emotion or meaning, but it occurs in the form of intended action or non-action. Further, I aim to explore the idea that emotion can function as a tool used to navigate “the internet” as a potential *emotional compass*. How can affect, emotion, and feelings combined with technology and social media in Yangon today be understood?

Affect and Technology

The affect of technology is a field that has already been explored for a long time. How the affect from technology affects us in ways we do not realize or are aware, and the fact that the smartphone is with us at all times and becomes part of our lives. Amongst others Turkle, Miller & Sinanan as I have mentioned earlier in this thesis. In Yangon today, with a relatively short period with full access, one can see how fast this technology becomes a big part of people's lives. How quickly we adapt and get involved in the internet in all sorts of ways. I would argue that people in Yangon today are not any less attached to their smartphones than people that had full access since "the birth" of this technology.

Turkle writes about a *tethered self*, addressing how the phone becomes a part of you (Turkle, 2011). It can be described as "an extra limb," her focus is on how the smartphone affects us, in many ways without us realizing it. How concentration is more laborious, as we get distracted, conversation and socializing is different and that the term always on/always on you makes perfect sense. If one then looks at affect as something that creates a gap between the cause of the affect and a person's interpretation of it, and that the cause of affect is a general trigger that releases a built-in psychological response which is free of meaning. It would occur ahead of any cognitive intention (Tettegah, 2016, p. 4); it raises questions on how affect and emotion are connected. If we then look at the affect or source of affect as the smartphone, the question rather would be; how are the smartphone and a person's emotional picture connected?

In the theory of attainment, Miller and Sinanan argue towards an understanding of this technology as part of our humanity, not in the middle or "in the way" of it (D. Miller & Sinanan, 2014). Miller and Sinanan disagree with Turkle in the general understanding of the affect of the technology since Turkle looks at it as something in between that facilitate communication, rather than something we, our selves, mediate. Even though my understanding of tethered still resonate with the arguments in the attainment theory. Once something or someone is tethered, the technology is, in many ways, part of you and then also part of your humanity. Moreover, as Miller and Sinanan argue, whatever the future brings, something nobody can know, it is still going to be a part of our humanity (D. Miller & Sinanan, 2014, p. 12).

Online Expression of Emotions

What is an online feeling and how can one express a feeling through a device? In this part I connect feelings, intimacy and privacy, and will in this section, focus on feelings and intimacy. Lambert, a new media researcher who looks at online intimacy through the lens of Facebook, argues that Facebook, rather than creating new, intensifies already existing relationships *through intensified intimacy and a potentially jealous gaze* (my emphasis) (Lambert, 2013). I will through my empirical data support this argument and claim that Facebook is not creating new relationships, friendly, loving or unfriendly ones, but rather opens up a new space where people can act out their feelings. This involves friendships, family, and dating-relations. These concepts of relationships are not new, but Facebook is creating an additional platform where these relations can be acted out. This is something Miller has described with *Scalable sociality* (Daniel Miller, 2016), where privacy, relationships and/or the wish to be public or not is part of the choice of platform, where one chose to express what. In Yangon, all these scales, different places, and ways to express oneself exist within Facebook. Facebook is then is replacing or adding to whatever ways they acted these relations out ahead of Facebook if they were able to. Facebook (may) influence the performance of intimacy, in this case, feelings. (Lambert, 2013, p. 19) Miller's social scale is part of the performance of the actor, choosing *on* which platform, or *in* which form, the feelings are acted out on Facebook.

I meet up with Mimi and Pemala at the main building of the university. They take me around the campus where they study and introduce me to some of their friends. The sun is still high in the crystal blue sky, and umbrellas are acquired to gain some shade. After the small tour, we walk towards the ice bar. The dusty air and sound of honking cars surround us when I feel my longyi slide open for the third time today. The girls help me adjust it, this time with a proper knot. They laugh, I still need to learn how to tie it *just tight enough*. Mimi and Pemala study social science, play baseball and consider themselves the best of friends. You could almost think that they are sisters or twins in the way they finish each other sentences. Sometimes to help out with the English translations, but more often than other, it happens intuitively and with a big smile. I always envy their beautiful longyis, today they have two different shades of pink and purple, both with a golden embraided pattern. In the heat, Ice Berry is crowded, but we manage to find a table under the air-condition and welcome the cold air. Sipping on my milkshake, I ask if they use Facebook in school, or if it is just for private use. Delaying a bit, they are a bit conflicted. After a while, they do agree that; no, it is mainly private use.

I hesitate, and Mimi continues. Leaning towards me and almost whispering the words as she looks around to see if she recognizes someone, “Sometimes its awkward,” she says.

Sometimes they fight on Facebook but are friends at school. I do not understand. How can they be friends at school, but fighting online? The answer amazed me; “on Facebook is the real feelings” Pemala says. Mimi continues; “In real life, they fake it.” Digging deeper, they connect this to politeness, and that in “real life,” you do not tell someone what you feel or mean. You can, however, write a status about it, of course without mentioning any names. When someone interprets that the status-update is pointed at them, it is a foundation for conflict.

This shows us how Facebook works as a channel where conflict can play out. As Lambert points out, this conflict is not something new or brought to us by Facebook. The emotion is there; Facebook provides additional space to act out and perform the feelings. It is similar to love and affection, where they often write status updates showing tender feelings towards other girls or boys. On Facebook, they dare to speak out, without mentioning names, how their “real feelings” is online, but in “real life,” as Mimi and Pemala call it, they downplay it. Following Goffman, one could argue that Facebook function paradoxically as backstage while “real life” is front-stage (Goffman, 1969). How is this, then, that the real feelings happened online. Why is this so? Why do they feel like they cannot show their emotions in a face to face position? In what other ways can we see this? Before I try to answer, I will introduce one more situation, dating in Yangon.

Dating in Today’s Yangon

In Myanmar, it is still uncommon to show affection in public. As I was told and did see myself, you do not kiss or hold hands in public, not in the streets, on the mall or in restaurants. It could be easy to say that it is not a problem; you can be affectionate in the comfort of your home. However, if you are 16 years old and newly in love with a wonderful girl or boy, it is not always that simple. Very often do not only your parents live in the same house or building, but also your grandparents and sometimes an aunt or two. Especially with the older, more conservative, generations it is common to avoid showing affection for your new friend until marriage is a real possibility. To be openly dating can then, be problematic. My friend Thaung once told me that he would not date “for real” until he was ready to marry, for now, he just kept it casual, which meant ice cream-dates and maybe stole some small kisses. Mima and Pemala giggled when I asked them about dating or crushes before the seriousness in the question of a boyfriend came through, they had a clear opinion about this;

“we want to be free, we don’t want to follow “him” around!” they told me. Several of their friends had boyfriends, but they could see how they needed to hide away to be affectionate and how they got attached and tied to their boyfriends, spending considerably less time with friends. Pemala once looked at me and said with an unmistakable discontent in her voice; “It’s expected that you follow him around and listen to him.” Even though they want to be free for now, all three of them told me that it is more common amongst their friends to have a sweetheart at a younger age than before. Where do they hide, then? How do they manage to have an affectionate relationship without openly dating? Where are the couples “free space”? Walking through the public parks in Yangon, this is not a mystery for very long. A public park is a space where young couples can meet, and they are used as such. In every spot possible, behind bushes, under the trees and in the shadow of statues or other somewhat shielded areas, the grass is flat from blankets or filled with couples. All day long you can find couples hiding in the shadow of one or two umbrellas for a little privacy and shade from the sun. It is a normal sight, and I would guess it has been the case for quite a while.

Besides the public parks, these couples now have another platform to show affection. Facebook. Quite early, I started to notice many posts from my local Facebook friends, pouring out their hearts and feelings. Everything from love, anger, happiness, or other feelings. These posts stood out the most to me. I noticed how it was common to write about their affection without mentioning any names. Some examples from my Facebook feed is;

“You got the ways of a woman in love!”,

“To love is to suffer... To avoid suffering one must not love... But then one suffers from not loving...”

“I keep U safe but U spoil” edited as a text into a mirror selfie.¹⁰

Because of the content but also since they were often written in English, I could understand these posts. It is not only love and affection, but skepticism, happiness, sadness, and even hate and conflicts. Mimi and Pemala told me, while we were still at Ice Berry, that if someone misunderstood a post, they would rather believe their interpretation of what the Facebook post stated that what they would say to that person while speaking? It seemed like this was an issue they had encountered recently when Pemala explained; “It didn’t even say any name, it

¹⁰ These status updates were written in English. The Burmese written updates I was not able to read.

was not meant for them,” and Mimi finished, stating; “It is crazy [that they trust Facebook more]...”

Often when I asked my friends about these cases of flirtation, saying: “what did you mean with this post?” Alternatively, “if it were meant for someone special,” the girls would giggle and say; “yes, it’s this cute guy,” but never mention who he is. The boys would often toughen up and avoid answering; “no, it’s nothing.” Some of the posts were also deleted after a while. Dedan told me that he would go through his feed and delete these posts after some time, the girl should have seen it already, and that he would prevent a potential new flirt from seeing it. It is a big difference then, to talk about this out loud and to write online. Facebook is in some ways used as a tool to communicate feelings or affection; even arguments and conflict would happen online rather than in “real life.” One could then argue that the emotions are manifested into expressed feelings in an online environment.

Lambert’s informants made him conclude as follow: “The way which Facebook mediated people, combined with the way people embody and objectify themselves, sometimes leads to a form of socio-ontological insecurity which favors the offline world as the site of the ‘real’.”(Lambert, 2013, p. 138). In his case, Facebook is described as a “false world reality” you do not want to get too entangled in. This is, however, quite the opposite of what I was experiencing. With my informants, Facebook provides a reality which sometimes feels more real and open, or like Pemala described it; a free space. This does not, however, include everyone, but the connection is there. Since Facebook does not, in this view, mediate people, but instead offer a facility to carry out the conversation or perform the feeling. The internet, or Facebook in this case, is no longer merely another tool that people use, but an environment within which they operate and live, and therefore it would be natural that it is a place to express feelings as well. (Benski & Fisher, p. 1)

Unni Wikan, while working in Bali, talked about resonance which can be explained as a shared human experience. She writes that “Resonance demands something of both reader and author... ..a willingness on the part of both to engage whit another world, life, or idea”(Wikan, 1990, p. 269). This argument can be transferred to the communication of emotion expressed on Facebook amongst young adults in Yangon. In writing these particular status up-dates, it would be an expectation of the other part to understand, to resonate with the message. This then raise the question on privacy. How do people in Yangon interpret privacy?

Especially considering their background as a country with decades of military government and surveillance.

What's the Different Between Private and Public?

While talking with Mimi and Pemala about dating and boys, we naturally came across the topic of fake profiles and stalking. They told me about an application on Facebook that allowed you to see who had viewed your profile and how many times. I was a bit stumbled when they said that they could not believe that people used this. The argument was that this information was private. Not to the person holding the profile, as I thought, but to the person viewing the profile. "This is private, they should not know that I looked at their profile, that's my secret," Mimi told me confidently with Pemala nodding eagerly at her side. When asking them if they were not curious, they smiled, of course, they were, but it was unheard of to use this application. It all came down to trust and shame, concluding that it was shameful for the person looking at your profile if you knew about it.

Shame is then another level added to the equation. What role does it play? M. Rosaldo, working on the Ilongot and headhunting, talked about their concepts of "shame" and "guilt." She writes that shame and guilt are often seen as moral affects that are necessary to constrain the individuated self from dangerous and asocial acts of impulse, lust, and violence (Rosaldo, 1983, p. 136). Further, she writes that shame can function as almost a structure, or as norms, that can constrain or shape an individual's behavior to the society's constructions or "ways" and as such become significant to the daily life. The affect, then, is a potentially unaware fraction of the social frames created to perform the given feelings.

So, if Mimi and Pemala had used this function to see who had been viewing their profile, that would be shameful not only for the person attending their profile but also for themselves, since this is "none of their business." Shame then, if we choose to follow Rosaldo and Ilongot views, is associated with autonomy and respect, a necessary constraint to avoid acknowledgment of possible conflicts that would breed inequality (Rosaldo, pp. 141-145). Addressing shame in Bali Wikan writes that: "emotions are deepfelt concern with regard to both inner feeling and outer expression... .control of expression is also linked with fears of mockery and shame that implicate feelings of self-respect and self-value."(Wikan, 1990, p. 128). In this case, the outer expression would be a combination of online and offline action or performance. It is reasonable to think that the action would affect the emotions or feelings in your offline "body," but the action of doing something that makes you compromise these

feelings is done online. Others do not necessarily discover these actions, and it is, therefore, the self-consciousness and self-value connected to the emotion of shame that prevents Mimi and Pemala to feel like they want to use this function. It is shameful for them, as well as the viewer if they know who has viewed their profile.

Looking back to the status updates I presented earlier; they are quite personal. They were meant to be seen, as things posted in a newsfeed often are. There is then a distinction between what you choose to let people see, and the wish to know who saw it and how many times. When asking Dedan how he knew if the girls had seen his post, he would smile, roll his shoulders, and say: “Nah, they have seen it, I just know.” I will once more bring Goffman’s role-playing into my discussion. As mentioned earlier, Facebook somewhat functions as a backstage, within dating, arguing, and personal and private life. On Facebook, you choose your friends, whom that can see what kind of things, and what you share with these people. You somewhat construct the context of which you post and what you post there. Facebook is, as argued, looked upon as a safe space, a free-space where you can perform whatever feelings or thoughts you might have. However, this is, as expected, not unproblematic and without nuances.

Shame is an important aspect when discussing intimacy and sharing. In addition to what I already discussed, it also came up when I had my focus group interview. The students introduced me to the concept of poppers. A *popper* is a person who only shares positive aspects of their life and never any negative ones. This makes you an untrustworthy person, it is not realistic to only have a good thing happen to you, and you are therefore considered to be “fake,” untrustworthy. It is shameful to be a popper, and it is only when you share several sides of reality that you can be trusted. “Bad stuff happens to everyone!” the students told me.

There is an interesting balance in this concept, between being discreetly positive online and becoming a popper. Miller’s work in Trinidad showed him that, in their view, the truth of a person is not who they think they are, but rather who others deems them to be on the basis of their appearance, online and offline. This then means that the picture and status updates that is posted online and what one shows on social media is the *curated truth of a person*. (Daniel Miller, 2016) Miller describes Facebook in Trinidad as “the book of truth”, since social media makes what’s already visible in a person hyper-visible “...[and therefore] further re-enforcing their constructed identity” (Daniel Miller, 2016, pp. 111-112). It is therefore essential to have the right balance, a balance which is connected to shame viewed as discussed above. Is it

then reasonable to argue that my local friends find a way to balance the front- and back-stage online, in some ways mixing these frames? I would argue towards this view since everyone I talked to discussed this with me. In some way, this connects to an understanding of equality and sameness. When stating “nobody has only positive things in life” it is entailing a collective understanding that life itself has ups and downs, bad things happen, and one cannot hide this. If you do, nobody would believe you; they cannot trust, understand, or resonate with you. What is private then? In this context, it would seem like it is an understanding that, to be able to be a trustworthy person, one must also share what could be considered as private, the uphill as well as the downhill.

Emotional Compass

Feelings are also used as a compass to navigate whether something is trustworthy or not. Arkar, at the time sitting in his saffron-colored robe, shaved head and a computer on the desk next to him looked at me. It is strange to see him as a monk, and I get the feeling that he is a bit shy about it as well. He usually works as a teacher but is now serving ten days in the monastery. Earlier, before we started our interview, I got to spend some time observing him guide some of his students before their big exam the next day. We were sitting in a big hall on the right side after entering the old, worn down, monastery. The building was easy to spot with its golden towers but otherwise had a rather simple façade. At the end of the hall it was a big golden Buddha surrounded by colorful paintings. A distinct smell of betel-nut and rice lingered in the air, as it so often does in Yangon. The students were preparing for an exam that challenges them to set up a web-page, with all the coding and programming that comes along with it. A lot of the conversation and the coding itself were in English, to my surprise. He explains that the school had many students from other parts of Asia and that the school wants, therefore, to use as much English as possible.

Arkar, sitting relaxed in his chair, calmly explains why the different coding does not work and challenges them to try once more with his instructions. Between the student’s questions, he talks with me about the simple life as a monk, how he struggles with tying his robe and the set of rules he needs to follow; as not to kill, not even a mosquito. He shows me his arms; “look, my arms are full of bites!”. When the students were done, Arkar brings me up to his room. It is a big, open space with little furniture. Arkar himself has a small table, a mat, a fan, his computer and several bottles of water next to his bag. These bottles he got as a gift from his family since they are not allowed to buy things themselves, it needs to be donated. He shares this room with one other man; I call him Thagyamin. He works long hours on one of the big

container-ships sailing around the world. With his big smile, only the small table, and the mat, as well as an enthusiasm so present that he hardly manages to sit down calmly, Thagyamin seems to be the opposite of my friend Arkar. Thagyamin serves as a monk until he can get more work on the sea, he has no family or friends to stay with or money for a hostel, much unlike Arkar. He is in the upper middle class, has a big family, lots of friends, steady work and lives a more luxurious lifestyle than most locals can afford.

As the interview carries on, I ask Arkar about internet security and online source criticism, curious of perspectives regarding fake news. I wonder whether or not this is something he and his students are aware of. It is especially interesting to talk with Arkar regarding this, considering he use Facebook actively in his work. Many of his classes are broadcasted through live-stream in groups or at Facebook pages. Arkar tells me how he needs to prepare extra for these classes. “Live streaming cannot be deleted, you know. That is really important”. He continues to explain how the students that are not available in the exact moment can go back and watch the lesson and further how a “technical know-how” is important. I am startled by the answer; “technical to know how?”, I ask. He looks at me and smiles crooked. “Technical know-how, they have to know the technology exactly, to get the best quality or HD, the high definition.” He carries on with talking about this and how he learned to do live-stream through “googling” and watching YouTube-videos. I get the feeling we have misunderstood each other and are moving in a different direction in this conversation. Therefore, my questions become more directly about security and source trustworthiness. The answer is unanticipated:

“They [locals that attended a public school] do not know how to distinguish (the) which wrong information from the right. And that’s why, whenever they see information from Facebook, they are, you know, [he hesitates a bit before he continuous], they use to, very emotion... ..they don’t take time to think [if] it is real or not, actually they don’t have that kind of habit... ..they are very emotional, yeah, that is really important”.

I found this very interesting, how Arkar tells me about using the “feelings” as a tool to distinguish between the quality of sources. He connects this to the “technical know-how”, explaining how, in his view, a higher level of knowledge towards technology can be connected with a more developed skill to distinguish fake news from real ones.

Continuing his reasoning Arkar tells me how:

“Sometimes I got the news and I was really emotional, I think and re-think; that’s impossible! Okay, this information comes from which source, I have to trace back... ..The Myanmar people are very emotional; that’s Myanmar culture”.

He laughs a bit, looks at me pleased and say:

“Everyone can emotion, but we have brain, emotion and brain has to be balanced. Not all average¹¹ people have, only emotions, only hearth. Brain is too small... ..it has to be balanced”.

While working in Bali, Wikan(1990) made use of the term *feeling-thought*, which I find fruitful to look at in the Yangon context as well. In a similar way that the Balinese use felling-thought as a lens to see things through, so does the local users I talked with. Arkar shows how in the Yangon context, the connection, relation, and balance between the brain and the heart is a crucial tool in reasoning if something is reliable or not. This can reflect what Wikan says when she writes that: “I have grown convinced that feeling-thought or thought-feeling may be the better concept in that it does justice to a flow of experiences which is neither embedded ‘in’ the heart nor ‘in’ the mind, it flows”(Wikan, 1990, p. 139). The flow that Wikan and Arkar describe can then be a validation of the dependency of the given feeling to function as an emotional compass.

This can lead up to an argument of embodied knowledge, and that the concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977) should be part of the discussion. Habitus could be understood as a person’s relation to social space and the person’s choices, which help to continue shaping and withstand power-relations. As written by Hylland Eriksen and Schober: “Habitus, a term with its origin in Aristotle’s philosophy, was the connecting point between individual actors and the larger system, a form of internalized knowledge situated in the body that signals the implicit and nonverbal rules of a particular configuration.”(Campbell, Schober, Hylland Eriksen, Garsten, & McNeill, 2017) With the understanding of habitus as a person’s relation

¹¹ As background information for this statement it is important to know, when Arkar talks about average people, or “they”, he often means those persons who has attended public school. The school system in Myanmar is not the best. Several informants told me that people can accomplish a diploma in English without being able to speak or use the given language.

to the soundings, as the experience of a lived life to distinguish and make sense of the world, as the embodied experience converted to the knowledge I would like to return to Bali once more. Wikan writes: “consciousness is the essence of feeling-thinking, and experience is being shaped and memories activated by the active engagement of feeling-thought” (Wikan, 1990, p. 35). Looking through this particular lens, emotions and feelings can then be accepted as real and as validation of the given context or information. Arkar’s statement would then be true as well and would explain how people can use their feelings to differentiate the information given through Facebook. As we know, Facebook is the main access point in Yangon to news and the internet in general. We also know that Facebook is not the most trustworthy source as they, the company, are not responsible for the articles shared on their platform. Facebook is a social platform, not a media house with given restriction to validated facts, and therefore, one needs to be critical to what one finds on the given page. In the next chapter, I will show how the performed sociality and produced social frames play out on Facebook in Yangon. This is a discussion that gains more depth after the knowledge gained from this chapter regarding the emotions, feelings, and emotional compass.

Chapter 6.

“Facebook and Performed Sociality”

Facebook can inhabit many different roles and make room for a wide range of different perspectives. At the same time, it is part of producing the frames which people perform within. It is shaping the performed sociality - what is said or showed online.

“The context of a performance is set partly by the way users have organized connections to create an online public space. It is also set by its subject form and matter, the media used, and the social relationality of the people it depicts, discusses, tags, and so forth” (Lambert, 2013, p. 155)

Lambert focuses on *context*; I will, however, focus closer on *frames*, inspired by Goffman’s work (Goffman, 1969). The frame is defined by the context which a person socializes within. As Lambert writes, this is everything that could, potentially, affect the given situation. The frame is not static but can change according to the context of a situation. The change of a frame happens more slowly since a framework consists of relations, politics, and so forth, while the context, which is connected closer to surroundings and the particular situation, can change rapidly. The performed sociality happens within the given frames and context, which creates the social norms in a society. Performance can easily be connected to self-consciousness (D. Miller & Sinanan, 2014), as we could see in chapter 4 when Mimi and Pemala talked about privacy. In that situation, the given set of frames and context made it shameful for them to look at who had viewed their Facebook profile, even though nobody would have known it. Their self-consciousness combined with the social norms created by the given context and frame, that shaped their room for socially acceptable performance.

If we take a closer look at the social norms within which online sociality is performed, in Yangon, it can roughly be divided into three different levels. These levels function together and affect each other, but to gain a clearer picture of the landscape of the social frames; I will separate them. The first level is “on the ground,” the frames of how one act with other people in day to day situations. This includes conversation, social norms, interactions, and all sorts of communication between people, online and offline. This first level is where the performed sociality is acted out, affected by the two other levels. The second level is the national one. What kind of frames does the government, or the military create on a national level, and how are they different from the frames “on the ground”? The third and last level is international. Facebook’s governance, algorithms, and possible censorship would be placed at this level.

Facebook is a space in which online sociality is performed both at the ground level and the national level, but Facebook as a company, the people creating the social frames on the platform, is not connected to Myanmar specifically. Facebook has its own set of rules, guidelines, and therefore, social frames, which is consistent and not changing according to borders. They stay the same in every country. It is then between these three levels, my informants find themselves and to some extent, negotiate between the different social frames of how to perform a socially accepted behavior.

This chapter will discuss and explain how this performed sociality plays out and what frames that surround it. In which ways do these levels appear when looking at actions and outcomes? To be able to do this, I will first address how Facebook, the platform, functions in terms of algorithms. What is the job of the algorithm, and can they be manipulated in any way? To what extent can Facebook work as an echo chamber? How does Facebook's security system work in Myanmar? Exemplified, through the case of the Rohingya crisis and hate speech on Facebook, I will show why it is essential to discuss and be aware of such questions.

Facebook – “The Happy Place”

We can look at Facebook as one big infrastructure which entails and holds the structure for several smaller systems that function within the platform. With a focus on algorithms, it is easy to recognize a pattern. It is well known that Facebook's algorithms show content in the feed that they predict that a person likes and enjoys. The algorithms' main goal is to shape the feed into a personal “happy place,” personalized to fit someone's particular interests. The algorithms collect information from posts, responses, and online interaction. This can be information like a “like” or a comment, and specific post one spends more time to read or what someone passes quickly by. They can pick up words or other vital points that can give a clue of what would entertain a specific person. Most people would have experienced that if you respond or search for something specific, the next day, something similar will most likely be shown in your Facebook feed.

My friend Dedan once told me how he trains his Facebook feed. We were sitting in our regular place in 19th street, eating BBQ-food and sipping cold, fresh Myanmar Beer. I told him how annoyed I was of some commercials on Facebook, and how I was tired of the same kind of content popping up regularly just after looking for it. Laughing, he looked at me like I had missed out on something obvious. Dedan told me how he trained his feed. If he had, for example, a period where he was more interested in cars, he would spend some time searching

for cars, looking at pictures and movies and liking them; voila, he could enjoy car-related content in the days to come. “It’s like a dog!” he said. Asking him further if he felt that this interacted with his personal life and privacy he responded:

“I feel safe on Facebook. Instead of thinking ‘oh, someone is fucking my privacy’ you can train your Facebook, let them know what you want. I only play movies that I like”.

It is essential not to omit that Dedan, working as a programmer, has a better understanding of how these functions work than most people have. It was Dedan that first told me how the algorithms created a “happy place.” It is still interesting how he does not seem to feel that it interacts with his private life or privacy in general, as this is a common concern in western parts of the world. When stating that he feels safe on Facebook, he also mentions that he “is not an interesting person,” and therefore, the government would not be interested in him. About one month earlier, on one of our weekend trips, we discussed the same theme, privacy. He then said that: “Facebook reads all messages and that they have computers that recognize stuff in the chats, this is good if someone is doing something criminal, but scary thought.” Once more, Dedan said that he was not scared of being watched himself since he is not an interesting person and that the government has much other stuff to think about. For Dedan, Facebook is a place he can use to get access to the things that interest him the most through disciplining his feed. He sees himself as the person in control, not Facebook or the Government.

It is, however, only Dedan that described doing this intentional disciplining of the feed amongst my informants. Most do not talk about it, or, from what I experience, even think much of it. Even so, these algorithms need to be addressed to be able to understand how hate speech allegedly might spread like wildfire on Facebook. If one interacts with a post containing a specific utterance, it is likely that the algorithms will show something similar once more. Further resembling interactions would mean more content of the same character and so on. This is not limited to the given person’s interaction itself, which means that it is not as fully controllable as it would seem in Dedan’s view. The algorithms would, in addition to someone’s activity, collect the popular content amongst the given person’s Facebook-friends, liked pages and connections, as well as popular content in the area.

The network surrounding the given person is part of what is shown in the feed. It then could exist, in this case, a combination between the two levels of agency – or performance – Dedan and his “trained dog” on the one hand, and Facebook’s algorithms on the other. Facebook and its algorithms are broader than Dedan might understand them as. Without the way the

algorithms are created, it would not be possible to “train” them, as Dedan explains. In doing so, he is in many ways helping the algorithms to do their job better and more precisely, even though Dedan’s technique does not include the knowledge of how the algorithms include information from the network surrounding him. Incorporated in that balance is the second level, the national political context, norms, and understanding, which produce the given frames to perform within. What is shown in the feed is then “the perfect combination” of content adjusted to a person’s preferences and given frames to create a “happy place.” This means that in the end, you can end up with only one specific side of a narrative being represented in the feed.

This is something Facebook has been criticized for, and that has created debates on an international level. At this point, it is not hard to imagine how the echo chamber comes into play. When the awareness is towards just one side of a narrative, it is likely to affect opinions and understanding of a situation, as has happened in Myanmar. Arkar, the teacher (see chapter 5.), told me that if he were a politician, he would, without doubt, use Facebook. He told me that:

“you see many Facebook walls or social media walls as campaign, you know, ‘now I want to share my knowledge with someone’, that’s how it is... ..Facebook is very important to politics and education”.

Why is Facebook Losing the War Against Hate Speech?

Facebook has become a tool to spread opinions, information, and propaganda. It is a place where used correctly, it is easy to spread one narrative. Also, this is what Arkar points towards with his statement; Facebook is an echo chamber where the narrative can flourish, and even produce more narratives of the same character.

In the Myanmar context, Facebook has received harsh critique regarding the way the company handled the crisis of the Rohingya with an extreme amount of hate speech flourishing in their platform. In August 2018 Reuters wrote an article titled “Why Facebook is losing the war against hate speech in Myanmar” (Stecklow, 2018b), explicitly pointing out the weakness and loss of action from the company towards a solution. The Human Rights Council did an independent fact-finding mission on Myanmar in September 2018 and concluded that hate narratives are common and that Facebook “fosters a climate in which hate speech thrives, human rights violations are legitimized and, incitement to discrimination and violence facilitated” (2018, p. 14). These reports are all referring to the Rohingya crises which

gained widespread international attention in 2012. The Muslim community called the Rohingya lived in Rakhine state. They were violated to the extreme and were forced to flee from their homes. I will not go through this conflict in detail but use it in order to explain and discuss how Facebook could be such a big part of this picture and receive the amount of criticism that it has. How come Facebook ended up in the middle of the attention surrounding this particular conflict, and what can it tell us about Facebook's position among local users and my informants?

I wish to be clear regarding one crucial fact: Facebook did not cause the Rohingya crises, which I later use as a case, and that fact is vital to acknowledge. They did, however, create a platform where opinions got to flourish and spread, as the Human Rights Council report states: “Facebook has been a useful instrument for those seeking to spread hate, in a context where, for most users, Facebook is the internet” (HRC, 2018, p. 14).

It could be easy to give Facebook the blame for allowing the situation to grow into what it developed to be, but there are always several sides to a story. According to the articles in Reuters (Stecklow, 2018b) and Wired (McLaughlin, 2018), Facebook did not take action early enough. They reported that Facebook in 2015 only had 2 employees that could read Burmese and could work with reported content. None of them were stationed in Myanmar. Later on, this work was outsourced to a company situated in Kuala Lumpur, still not with enough Burmese speaking employees to be able to go through reported post fast enough, but things seem to be moving in the right direction (McLaughlin, 2018).

However, Facebook is not entirely to blame for the situation. Facebook's algorithms struggle with reading and interpret Burmese scripts; this is alleged because of font issues. It should come as no surprise then, that Zawgyi is part of the problem. As addressed in chapter 4., the codes in Zawgyi are different from Unicode, and if the algorithms are designed to interpret Unicode, Zawgyi would, once again, become an issue. As far as I can tell, it would suggest that the widely used Zawgyi is the main reasons the algorithms 'struggle' within the interpretation and translation. When the algorithms are not able to read and sort out the discriminating content, naturally they would not be able to stop offensive content in such a preferable degree.

This technical issue does not just limit the security part where algorithms fail; it is also causing translation problems. Facebook's translation-tool fails to give an accurate translation of content. Reuter's example of hateful speech shows how translations are failing. The original Burmese post said: “Kill all the kalars that you see in Myanmar; none of them should

be left alive”. Facebook’s algorithms translation was then: “I shouldn’t have a rainbow in Myanmar” (Stecklow, 2018b). As a result of this issue, the translation-function was removed until further notice on the 28. August 2018, after just a short period of time (Stecklow, 2018a).

Mimi and Pemala once told me how English translation was a problem. I had asked them about the Facebook posts some people write in English and why. Laughing, they looked at me and said that it is because of “likes,” they get more likes if they write in English. When asking if all of their Facebook friends were able to read it, referring to the level of English skills most people inhabit, Mimi answered: “Nooo, not all of friends.” Pemala continued: “They like it still, translation is bad, so they cannot understand all posts.” I did not think much of it at the time, but it turned out that this is part of a more significant issue. If the translations were accurate, it could have been, in addition to understanding posts in general, an essential tool in the fight against hate-speech. Proper translation could allow non-Burmese-speaking residents to report potential hateful content.

The Facebook-system, the algorithms that usually works with constraining hate speech is not fully functional with Burmese script, and this is partly because of the font issues. This means that Facebook is more dependent than in most of the other countries they work in on their users to report content that is discriminating or violent in the platform, and that they depend on having enough employees to handle the reported content. In most parts of the world, this is functional, and together with the algorithms, it is sufficient. Why not in Myanmar?

We already know that Facebook was too late to the game with sufficient Burmese-speaking employees, but what about the first step? For the employees to be able to do their job they rely on the fact that people actually report content to review.

To then be able to function appropriately, Facebook relies on what Miller addresses as *participatory surveillance*.(Daniel Miller, 2011, p. 173). Alternatively, as Lambert puts it: “Facebook is a kind of ‘participatory panopticon’ in which users willingly submit to the ‘policing and establishing of normative behavior.’” (Lambert, 2013, p. 41) This allows the users, to some extent, surveil their environment in the feed. Through interactions and reporting content, they are part of the security system as well as establishing the social frames, contexts, and norms of the accepted behavior, or in this case – the sound of the content.

However, to be able to report anything, one must first know that reporting is a real option. Furthermore, one must know how to report the given content physically. And last, but not least; one needs to actually disagree with the content and find it *offensive enough* to bother taking action and not just scroll by it. None of these preconditions are self-evident in Myanmar today, especially not the latter one. This is where the distinction between three levels becomes useful. In reporting content all three levels are in play at the same time; the third level with Facebook's own guidelines and restrictions of what is acceptable and not, the second national level where the government and military's narrative is part of creating the frame, and the last level where the sociality is performed and acted out. These three levels do not always agree with each other, as we will see in the following case. The first level is here represented by the Facebook users, who may take the role as 'reporters' and which normative frames they perform within. This frame is a combination of the two other levels, as well as whatever else is happening in people's lives that would shape the context or the frame. This is then the established norms, views, or "commonly accepted narrative" that is valid in the process of choosing to report or not to report the content. Again; the given person needs to find the content offensive enough to take action.

The Narrative of "The Land-Grabbing Bengali"

During my fieldwork, I was, more than once, taken a bit by surprise when the case of the Rohingya was discussed. It was not common to discuss the crisis, at least not in the circles I was socializing within or with me, as a foreigner. Reading about the conflict ahead of time, I had read about "the Rohingya crisis", now I was met with another perspective. When the few exceptions occurred, and I could ask a bit about the conflict, I got the narrative of "the Bengali". One taxi driver explained the conflict to me as:

"The Bengali [locals often don't say 'Rohingya', since they claim that the Muslim group is originally from Bangladesh] is landgrabbers from Bangladesh that's here to marry Buddhist women and breed Muslim children. Eventually they will conquer the whole country and destroy our culture."

This was not an uncommon explanation, and it can be described as a very xenophobic view. Human Rights Council reports that the government's response to the hate speech spreading in the Myanmar has been inadequate (HRC, 2018). More harshly represented is the military and government in the Wired article. Wired writes that the military and government have been amongst the most sophisticated users as use Facebook to forward their narrative out to the public.(McLaughlin, 2018). As a result of all the information mentioned above, it is not hard

to understand how the narrative of “the land grabbing Bengali” is expressed and wider spread and accepted rather than the narrative of “the crisis of the Rohingya”.

If we then look at Miller’s prediction from 2011 that Facebook will become “just one more medium for facilitating political action rather than a tool for the revolution and transformation of politics I would not entirely agree in the context of Myanmar. In the case of Myanmar, it has been proved that military-related personalities have misused Facebook to be able to spread hate speech and “fake news” as propaganda. These persons were, as a result of the Human Right Council fact-finding-report, removed from Facebook to prevent them from using the service to inflame ethnic and religious tensions in the country further (Chau, 2018; Mozur, 2018). This also means that Facebook can be, and has been, described as a tool to utter and spread particular views, and therefore in its way transformed political and/or a political outcome and public attitude.

It is here I once more will point to the echo chamber effect. With government and military personalities speaking out on behalf of one particular narrative spreading information to support this particular view. Combined with the fact that Facebook is the local user’s main access point to information and the way algorithms use personal information as well as the given person’s network, it is not hard to understand how the general view becomes accustomed to this particular narrative as well. It is moreover a valid explanation for the lack of sufficient reported content. If we assume that most people know how to report a post or content, they probably still would not report it, if they already share the general understanding of the conflict as “the land grabbing Bengali” rather than “the crisis of the Rohingya.” It is also essential to be aware that Facebook is an important factor, but it is not transcendent. Miller writes that Facebook primarily affects close social relations (Daniel Miller, 2011, p. 170), as we have seen in chapter 5. Even so, I would argue that Facebook in addition to the close relations, in the Myanmar context is part of shaping more general perspectives in and on a society.

Khine, one of my informants was, after my stay in Yangon, thrown out of Facebook. He had up to several times shared content in his Facebook feed, which would fall under the category of hate speech according to Facebook’s guidelines. As shown in figure VII,

which is a screenshot from my Facebook feed March 1., it is clear that it is the narrative of the land grabbing Bengali that is represented.

The lady in the movie explains how “the Bengali attacked us in the early morning at 4:36. One of our policemen was quickly killed”, further into the sequence, she continues to describe how “they are shouting many different things, like ‘Allahu Akbar’ and other frightening things.” When Khine later was asked about the circumstances surrounding the fact that he did not have a Facebook profile at the moment, his

explanation had been that he was thrown out of “the Zuckerberg regime”, that it was “a violation of freedom speech” and that “the truth is the truth, it doesn’t matter if it is hateful or not”. This is only one example of what kind of content that could be shown in my feed. Other times I would see dead bodies, burning houses, and other horrid pictures.

While talking to another informant, s/he¹² explained to me how BBC and CNN possibly blew the Rakhine conflict out of proportions. S/He said:

“If they say, like, 1000 people are killed, it could be only 2 persons... ..The soldier’s intention could be only fire a house or self-defense against Bengali”.

Later into the conversation s/he talked about manipulated photos and how international media showed just one particular side of the narrative. In the case of Khine the censorship of the third level, the international guidelines from Facebook, were the level acting out power. Or as Khine describes it; censorship. Which level defines the frames of what is okay to write and not? With such a different narrative on the national level and the international level, it is possible that this video would be allowed to remain in the power of removing content was assigned to the national level, supporting the narrative of “the land grabbing Bengali.” In that case, it is unlikely that Khine would have been ‘kicked out’ of Facebook.



Figure VII – Screenshot from Facebook feed, March 2018

¹² I do not reveal gender or name for ethical reasons.

What could it all tell us?

The first part of this chapter shows how Facebook became a centerpiece for discussion and critique in the context of this conflict. In the last part of this chapter, I will discuss what this means to my informants, what it can tell us about Facebook's position in their life? What can it tell us about them as persons?

After his work in Trinidad, Miller wrote that in the Trinidadian context Facebook was “the book of truth,” referring to statements such as “on Facebook, you will find who you are” He continues to describe how one cannot see the actual person through face to face conversation; the truth is what you see on Facebook. Lambert asks: “Does Facebook allow us to produce ourselves through first objectifying our self?” (Lambert, 2013, p. 40). if we then follow Miller's perspective, which also emphasizes the role of objectification, the answer to Lambert's question is yes. One can produce one's self through watching the objectified reflection of self, which is, in this case, the profile that is made on Facebook. The performed sociality is then shaped as a fluid form through the frames set by the self and the social frames set by society and by Facebook. As already discussed, Facebook's context and the social frames produced are shaped by the three levels mentioned earlier. It is all a complex, fluid, infrastructure that is forever changing.

A similar way of interpreting Facebook post can be seen in the Yangon context as well. Recall how Mimi and Pemala describe how the real feelings are on Facebook and that what you meet in “real life” can be fake. Following what Miller described, we could then conclude that Facebook helps construct what is perceived as “true persons.” However, according to polymedia theory, Facebook can never exist in isolation; it is defined through its existing or non-existing relations to other media (Daniel Miller, 2011). Facebook would, therefore, never actually be able to show the totality of a person's life, with all the variations and different contexts. Miller suggests that the ‘public’ that is represented by Facebook is better understood as a combination of private spheres (Daniel Miller, 2011, pp. 174-175). The suggestion would then be that the ‘public’ that Facebook represents is better understood as the combination of the different spheres. This can be understood as the frames that are produced through the three levels. To be a *popper*, as discussed in chapter 5, can be looked upon as an example of one of these social frames or norms. To avoid being a popper, one must perform according to the social norms in a certain way – to show more of life than just the positive.

Looking at Facebook as a socio-technical infrastructure can help us gain a broader perspective on the performed sociality in Yangon. Infrastructure works on many different levels at the same time and functions through activation, limitations, and circulation of goods and ideas. We can then approach these activations, limitations, and circulations as part of the structuration of social frames, the social context in which we perform. Following Goffman's view that every version of the self is to some degree performed and based on specific frames of expectations, and that "We play a variety of roles in life with different degrees of attachment and distance" (Daniel Miller, 2011, p. 177), it would validate the chapters argument of performed sociality, and creation of social frames. The degrees of attachment and distance can be seen in the relation the given person, in the given moment, have to the particular three different levels, and which expectation and then performance is acted out in the created context, frames, and norms. This variety of roles and relations can then be reflected in how the social expectation of a "perfect" Facebook profile should be. That would be not to suggest that life is a straight line with only good things happening, but a line with waves, a life with ups and downs. Avoiding being labeled as a popper, Facebook posts somewhat mimics social and cultural notions of what a "normal life" would be, somehow reflecting this online.

In the same way that infrastructures are crafted onto an already existing world and are a part of an accretion process, how one is presented online is crafted from already existing frames and expectations and need to be maintained too (Appel, 2015). This is not something static but a process that encourages maintenance through continued posting and interaction. Miller suggests that in the Trinidadian context, Facebook works as a virtual place where you can discover whom you are by being presented a visible objectification of yourself (Daniel Miller, 2011, p. 179). Dedan, during one of our conversations, said something similar as Mimi and Pemala. He as well stated that "the real feelings is on Facebook", and continued to explain that:

"If you really want to know someone, don't talk with him or her. Just stalk Facebook profile and you will see their ego's – there is no difference between Facebook and real life [when it comes to the ego]".

Dedan uses the words *ego* and *personality* as synonyms in this conversation, and he is, therefore, talking about people's real personalities while using the word *ego*. Facebook is then looked upon as a virtual place that can, to some extent, tell the truth of a person, without

actually meeting the person physically. This would, once more, reflect Miller's "Book of truth," just in a Yangon context.

This chapter has mainly addressed the two last research questions; what happens when Facebook becomes the primary internet access point in a community, how does the situation affect my informants and how do they, themselves, understand it? Through the Rohingya case, it became apparent that the situation in Yangon, with Facebook as ubiquitous and a function as an obligatory passage point is undesirable. The clash of the three levels, combined with technological issues as with Unicode and Zawgyi created place where hate speech and a one-sided-narrative could flourish. This situation affects local users' interpretations and understanding of what is right to them, and within which context, frames, and norms, they can act out their sociality and personality.

Chapter 7.

“The Digital Tsunami – Reflecting Thoughts”

Temporality is an interesting topic to discuss in addition to frames and social performance. How do my informants experience this double-sided temporality, the tempo-shifts surrounding everyday life? In 2014 they all of a sudden got access to a new world, and many could feel left out, or somewhat “lacking”. Alternatively, as Win described it earlier, that the entire country is *lagging*, it is not up to date, it does not function properly. In the Wire article, a journalist described the experience after re-entering the society in 2013 after some time in prison as being hit by a “digital tsunami”. (McLaughlin, 2018) This tsunami can be detected in many different aspects of the day-to-day life, and the tsunami is not always seen in just the more significant happenings, like internet access.

I was sitting on a rooftop-bar together with Thaug; we were at a jazz concert. It was a beautiful night, and we had just experienced an astonishing flamingly red and orange sunset. We enjoyed the music, and the extraordinarily view of the now brightly lighted Shwe Dagon Pagoda. Ordering our drinks, we discovered that the menus were something none of us had seen before. They felt quite heavy and had a double binding. When opened up, they had a dim lightning frame that lit up so that it was easier to read. We also discovered that they were charged with a USB-input, and both of us were quite fascinated by this high-tech-menus. This led us into a conversation of the new technologies Thaug had experienced the last five years, from just one analog phone to the smartphone lying next to him on the table. “With the country opening up, people are becoming more greedy,” he said confidently. “How come?” was my natural response, curious about the background of this statement. Thaug explained it further telling me how everywhere else in the world were developing so fast; they could not keep up. “Before MPT was king, now Ooredoo and Telenor made it [sim-cards] inferior.” The competitive markets, he said, made everything more easily accessible, which makes people greedier.

Thaug’s statement is interesting because it highlights how he experiences sudden changes, the tempo-shift that allow for quick changes. Thomas Hylland Eriksen has worked with a project focusing on “overheating,” addressing the accelerated development and globalization. How the world gets smaller. He writes that:

“Different parts of societies, cultures and life-worlds change at different speeds and reproduce themselves at different rhythms, and it is necessary to understand the disjunctures between speed and slowness, change and continuity in order to grasp the conflicts arising from accelerated globalization”(Eriksen, 2016, p. 472)

Hylland Eriksen's statement enlightens much of what this thesis has discussed earlier. When he talks of *clashing scales*, it is similar to the discussed clashing levels as addressed. Level three, containing the speed of the international development, somewhat aiming at functioning together with the second level, the national one, and the national speed. The first level, the acting people, is not necessarily synchronized with any of the two first levels. In Yangon, these different tempos can be seen in the case of the Rohingya, and Thaug has experienced it as people growing greedier. Others, as Dedan, experience it differently.

Dedan once told me how it was so easy now, to contact girls. With a bright smile, he told me how he a few years ago needed to write a paper-note that he gave to the girl. “Now I can message her! It’s so easy!” he said happily. He was able to have a conversation in a short time.

In another book discussing overheating and acceleration, Hylland Eriksen, together with Elisabeth Schober, writes that: “Whether it is planned or unplanned, rapid change has unintended side-effects, [and it] is understood differently by people in different subject positions.” (Campbell et al., 2017). This accelerated development plays out in a lot of different areas. With a more competitive market, new international companies have entered the country as Thaug focused on, aside from sim-card distributors as Telenor and Ooredoo, there is among others bigger food-chains such as Lotteria and Burger King. Something I could enjoy. However, when suggesting such food to my local friends, they were skeptical. Dedan once said: “hamburgers and pizza? No, it tastes funny, I don’t like it”. More than once, this was the response, and they instead preferred to eat their local cuisine. Even though the widely accessible internet is something they, through Facebook, enjoy, not everything is as welcome, such as the food. People experience the new technology differently affected from which position, context, frames, and levels that is part of the given picture. On top of all of the mention is the experience of time, the temporalities, and how this is encountered.

Through Facebook’s constant presence, it is part of shaping the interpretation of narratives and create an environment in Yangon where, unfortunately, hate speech thrives. Facebook the corporation, was not prepared for the situation and was not able to handle it properly. So accordingly, throughout this thesis, it becomes evident how Facebook is so much more than a webpage or a social media platform. In positioning itself as an obligatory passage point (Law

& Callon, 1988), to “the rest of the internet,” it additionally shapes itself into a social actor that plays an essential role in how people live their life in Yangon. Not only through the convenience for communication, planning and other practicalities in everyday life, Facebook is also a big part of the emotional life of young adults, a part of how they make decisions and a part of a process of liberation.

Facebook has, as we have seen, without a doubt, become important to people’s life in Yangon. Facebook seems to be somewhat ubiquitous; it is everywhere and taken for granted in most occasions. The whole system and the infrastructure that Facebook is becomes clear through the way Facebook makes itself essential to local users. Throughout the thesis, in the discussions of the fonts, emotion and later Facebook addressed as a social actor in the terms that it can be, and has been, misused to forward one specific narrative. It is then easy to recognize how my informants are entangled with Facebook in the day to day life, and how Facebook has become the platform through one perform sociality, it is the main access point to gain information. Additionally, Facebook is in Yangon educational, entertaining, a platform which allows a flirt, a space to show emotion and in general, to people in Yangon, a place that makes it possible to be a part of “the rest of the world.”

Even though Facebook has become this significant platform and positioned itself as “the internet” in Yangon, it does not naturally follow that the Burmese people are loyal to Facebook, because of “Facebook.” As Miller said about the Trinidadians, I would argue that a similar view follows in Yangon as well. If there were another platform able to deliver the same services, there is no apparent reason to stay loyal to Facebook (Daniel Miller, 2011, p. 203). As this thesis has addressed, the road to Facebook as the internet through the use of smartphones has been short. Instead of using the browser application, one uses Facebook. Whenever you would buy a smartphone, Facebook is already pre-installed, or they do this in the store before you leave. In addition to this, information outside Facebook is often in a font which the given device typically does not support, Unicode, while Facebook supports both Zawgyi and Unicode.

The thesis aimed to gain an understanding of how the given situation affects my informants, how they understand and interpret it, and what I can understand from it.

In the theoretical framework, I positioned myself closer to Sinanan of Miller’s “theory of attainment” than to Turkle’s view of the mediated person. Facebook in Yangon is part of peoples lived life; it is a place where they perform their sociality; it is a place where they seek

attention, information, and other people. Mimi and Pemala described how “the real feelings are on Facebook,” explaining how people trust in Facebook more than they trust each other in face to face conversations. Therefore, Facebook does not mediate conversations. It does not place itself in between people; it facilitates a platform which people are allowed to live out their lives in every possible human way; it has become part of humanity. At the same time, we should not overlook the many factors that shape these conversations and the performed sociality, or how local users, as the western user, are tethered to their phones. Facebook in Yangon needs to be understood through its contextualizing terms. This thesis has looked at Facebook and explored the case from different perspectives; through the battle of the fonts with technological challenges, through affect and emotions and how Facebook is understood as a place of truth, and lastly, discussing the three clashing levels and Facebook as a system.

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