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Accessibility to Education during the "Coup-Vid": An Overview of Online Learning in Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

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While the concept of online classes is not new to the rest of the world, this became a common mode of learning in Myanmar only when the COVID-19 challenges became a reality in 2020 as physical classrooms could no longer be used. When the coup d'etat was staged in 2021, education was further halted since many schools and their students did not have the resources to teach and learn online in addition to the political instability. However, online learning has been trending on social media for those who do have access to these resources. This paper will investigate the ways in which young people engage in education facing the "coup–vid" (coup + COVID-19), the motivation behind such engagement, and insights how they are benefiting from digital tools for learning.

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar and its people are not new to obstacles as they have faced years of challenges due to colonialism, the military regime, and internal conflicts, which affected the economy and society. Since the democratically elected government took over after the 2010 and 2015 election, the situation in the country was improving (Jolliffe & Mears, 2016). More budget was allocated towards education and the private school sector expanded rapidly (Oxford Business Group, 2020). However, the ubiquitous harsh influence of the Covid-19 pandemic could also be found in Myanmar where schools were shut down; Myanmar was ranked ninth among countries with the highest number of days of full school closures from March 2020 to February 2021, with around 9.6 million students who have missed at least three-quarters or almost all classroom instruction time (UNICEF, 2021). In addition to the pandemic, the country is now facing the harsh conditions of living under the military regime. Some academics have looked into Myanmar's current state of education since the Covid-19 pandemic and the military coup began, such as Htut, Lall, and Howson (2022) who have interviewed other academics on this topic. Drawing on secondary literature, this paper aims to answer the following question: How have students in Myanmar adopted e-learning since 2020 during the pandemic and political crisis?

This paper will investigate the student's perspective of education during the "coup-vid," particularly how and why they have engaged in online learning since February 2021. With a hermeneutic analytical approach, a small-scale survey is used to gather information on the digital learning experience of Myanmar students. After a concise literature review highlighting the history and current situation of Myanmar, the paper will present the method and findings of the survey, followed by a brief discussion of the implications for education in Myanmar.

Literature Review

While social, economic, and political conditions have affected the general Myanmar public, many scholars, teachers, and students have long criticised the instructional methods and curriculum of Myanmar's public education due to its regressive traditions and its consequent unsuitability for students to prepare for the modern world (Bertrand, 2022; Harcourt, 2018). To achieve better grades, students have had to rely on shadow education, involving private tutors and cram schools. Not only that, regardless of the ruling party, the government places restrictions on the education of the languages and cultures of ethnic minorities (Cardinal & Sonntag, 2015). Affordable options include monastic education, but their teachings are largely limited by topic and demographic, namely Buddhist religion and its followers, and inadequate material and human resources (Saruya, 2022). After the 2021 military coup, the majority of public-school teachers and their students have joined the Civil Disobedience Movement. By voluntarily not going to school or work, their decision aims to undermine the legitimacy of the junta who ordered them to return to school (Nikkei staff writers, 2021). This resulted in the jeopardy of plans for education reform (Htut et al., 2022) and the suspension of more than 125,000 Myanmar teachers, accounting for more than 25% of the Myanmar workforce in teaching and academics (Reuters, 2021). As such, many Myanmar youths have opted for private education while some have emigrated overseas in pursuit of a higher quality of life and education (Harcourt, 2018).

Those who have chosen to go on strike and are still in the country may not be able to choose the aforementioned options for various reasons, which gave rise to the popularity of online learning. Typically considered as informal education that is available at little to no additional costs, they are more accessible to the underprivileged so long as they have a mobile device and an internet subscription. Since the coup began, the military government has placed internet restrictions, interfering with people's right to access information (Ratcliffe, 2021); even when the internet is available, its speed has slowed down significantly (Januta & Funakoshi, 2021). The UNDP (2021) has predicted that half of Myanmar's population could be in poverty by 2022, implying that the number of mobile device owners and internet subscribers is likely to decline. Additionally, the military has also hiked internet prices (Haffner, 2022) and mandated power outages which became more frequent in 2022 (Myanmar Business Today, 2022). This further limits mobile and internet access and consequently inhibits e-learning in Myanmar during this period of economic and political crisis.

METHOD

The research will analyse the primary data results of an online questionnaire using secondary literature. The questionnaire is used to remotely survey around 30 randomly selected Myanmar youths to answer the research question. This section aims to elaborate on how the data is collected before further analysis.

As the questionnaire aims to understand their e-learning experiences, the youths are either students or recent graduates from 2020 to the present time. To make the answering process easier, the questions have been provided in English and Burmese and sectioned into several parts: demographics, questions for all youths, questions for youths who studied with e-learning since 2020, and questions for those who did not study during this time. For students who studied during this period, the questions have been further divided into those about familiarity with e-learning, agree-disagree Likert scale questions, and open-ended questions. For students who did not study, the questions are mostly open-ended, and the number of questions asked is significantly reduced. More details can be found here.

Over the course of a week in May 2022, the questionnaire was sent out through word of mouth and through email, online messaging, and social media platforms Facebook, Instagram, Discord, and Twitter. The data is presented in the next section with charts and verbal descriptions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Most of the participants agree that their education has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and the military coup in 2021 due to health reasons, internet problems, power outages, and financial challenges among other reasons. 91% of the respondents have considered e-learning at some point to further their academic and career paths. Half of the respondents have attended public schools and universities and hold an undergraduate degree while others have attended private institutes or both public and private institutions and hold varying levels of educational qualifications. All of the respondents have access to a stable internet connection at least half the time, with the majority possessing a mobile phone and/ or computer while some also have a tablet. Only 36% agree that online learning is as effective as face-to-face learning and possibly provides better education than their regular institutions. Two-thirds of the respondents report their institution has switched to online mode of learning, with only 30% being reliant on online learning before the spread of Covid-19 and 90% after the pandemic began. When given a list of institutions offering online lessons, 20% of the respondents surprisingly claim they have not heard of any of them. Furthermore, although all participants are familiar with using technology for personal and entertainment purposes, only 60% can claim they can use it effectively for academic purposes. In fact, 10% of them are not familiar with any e-learning tools.
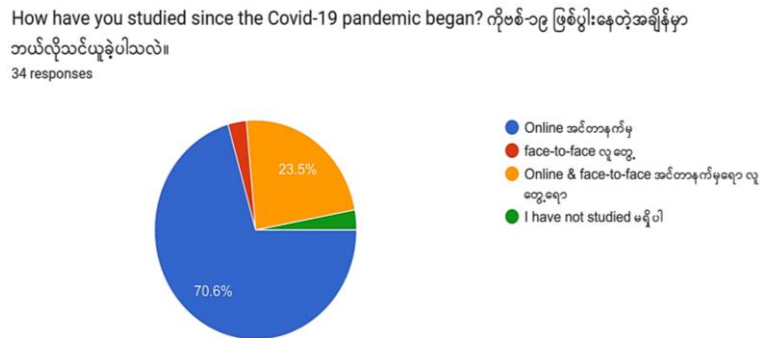
Figure 1. The mode of learning since the Covid-19 pandemic began
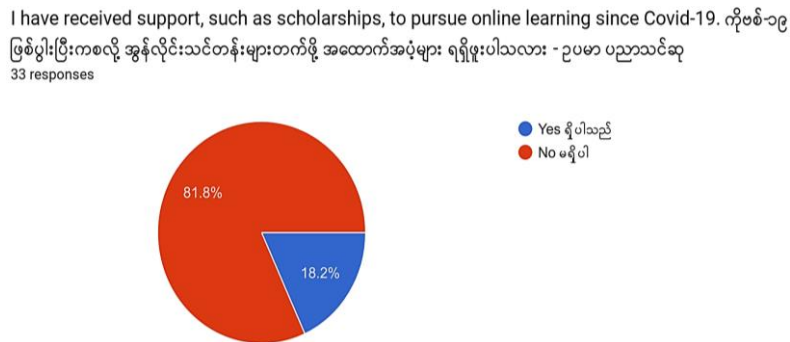
Figure 2. The support for learning received since the Covid-19 pandemic began

The open-ended questions received answers of varying opinions. Many Myanmar students demonstrated their motivation to continue studying and work towards professional success. Some learned with local institutions while others also learned from foreign resources such as Duolingo. Many also say they switched to e-learning because of the coup-vid situation, while others also attribute their choice to the variety and availability of education resources, lower costs, and flexibility. However, in addition to other circumstances in Myanmar as stated above, the lack of face-to-face interactions affected their motivation and mental health in their e-learning experience. When asked what could be done to improve their e-learning, many wished for better internet connectivity. Technological issues were addressed eventually as students developed familiarity with their mobile devices, but they still had difficulties maintaining focus and required more tips to study online

effectively. Furthermore, to further their development, many students considered volunteer opportunities and work experience as alternatives to online learning.

Youths in Myanmar had undoubtedly faced several struggles while pursuing their studies online during the coup-vid turmoil. The results found in the survey illustrated that students need digital literacy courses and scholarships to continue e-learning in Myanmar. Students who had familiarity with digital study tools and platforms would most likely be from middle-class families with the resources to send their children to private schools; private schools have the human and financial resources to offer quality education involving e-learning and academic advising services (Lwin, 2019). Online learning is popular, but not everyone has considered it or heard of it until the pandemic (Chart 1); students may need more guidance on e-learning and online learning institutes in Myanmar may need to boost the promotion of their courses.

Regardless of the type of institute Myanmar students attended and what level of education they attained, the pandemic, internet connectivity issues, and power outages have affected their online learning. Their grievances can be corroborated by cases that made news headlines with a student from York University (O'Neil, 2021) and another from the Education University of Hong Kong (Chan, 2021) who were studying remotely from Myanmar in early 2021. The first case concerned a university professor making light of what was happening in Myanmar, while the second case involved another professor who did not care about the student's situation; professors in both cases did not accommodate the student's need for flexibility in taking an online exam. The complexity of the situation Myanmar students face may be relatable for students in other nations in similar socioeconomic and political situations such as Colombia (Uwishema et al., 2022), Palestine (Hamamra, Alawi, & Daragmeh, 2021), and Hong Kong (Chan, 2020).

Notwithstanding, it was interesting to find that a quarter of the Myanmar youth respondents have been able to attend classes face-to-face since the pandemic began, which contradicts the assumption that students have not been able to study since the pandemic began due to school closure and lack of accessibility to online learning. While those with financial resources and networks can afford to access education one way or another, educators must search for strategies to reach students who cannot. Scholarships and other forms of aid would help students as they currently lack external support (Chart 2).

One of the reasons Myanmar students have not studied is "due to their family/ home," as one respondent reports. The vagueness of this response opens for discussion. A cause for this situation could be financial struggles that the respondent does not elaborate further. The Myanmar Labour Force, Child Labour, and School to Work Transition Survey conducted in 2014-2015 reports that 9.3% out of all Myanmar children are involved in labour (Myanmar Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, Central Statistical Organization and ILO, 2015, as cited in Ko Ko & May Oo, 2022), with actual figures anticipated to be much higher. In early 2020, the Myanmar government created the Covid-19 Economic Relief Plan (CERP) to alleviate the negative socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic (Myanmar Ministry of Planning, Finance, and Industry 2020, as cited in Ko Ko & May Oo, 2022). With the political situation now, the CERP is more or less void, and consequently more children may have to discontinue their education and be forced into labour. Another factor may be that the student is in hiding or internally displaced due to internal conflict in Myanmar. Though community members and volunteers try to offer schooling in the refugee camps, they lack funding that allows access to e-learning resources (Lwin, 2019). Regardless of the 95% youth literacy rate (UNICEF, 2019), the current situation in Myanmar could result in an increased reduction of the net school attendance rate for youths, which has been gradually decreasing for primary to lower secondary upper secondary school age with only approximately 36% finishing basic primary and secondary education (UNICEF, 2016). Yet another reason for not studying could be the student's active involvement in the political movement against the junta. As per news

reports and the study conducted by Htut et al. (2022), Myanmar students have joined the People's Defence Forces (PDFs), to fight the military regime. With conflict likely to ensue in the country in the near future, what lays ahead for Myanmar's education sector is uncertain.

The limitations of this study are as follows. The research inevitably excludes those who do not have proper access to the internet as the survey is disseminated online. The participants have largely been limited to the Yangon area, which is but a small portion of the whole nation. This paper looks at students who have attended public and/ or private education, which excludes monastic education, church-based education, and other forms of education in Myanmar that are not reported in this paper. To protect the identity of participants, less information has been collected in the "demographics" section which could affect the reliability of the data. Moreover, the window of data collection was narrowed by participant and researcher availability and the timeframe of the composition of this paper. Despite the bilingual questions, some respondents seemed to have misunderstood what was being asked while some students had no idea what to respond and consequently the researcher was unable to analyse their responses.

CONCLUSION

Plenty of literature exists on the state of education under the former military regime and some on the state of education under democratic leadership, but few on the current situation where students face the pandemic and political crises. Despite facing unpredictable and unfavourable circumstances coupled with a lack of support to study online, Myanmar students have demonstrated resilience by acquiring digital literacy skills and learning from online resources. With the help of educational institutions both local and global, local communities may need to encourage online learning for students who have difficulty continuing their studies; as one respondent has said in their survey response, such people may not even know what e-learning is. While the students surveyed consider face-to-face classes to be a major solution to issues found in their e-learning, the root of the problem lies in the broader education, economic, and political system. As cited in secondary literature, changes in the system are needed to ensure that the "normal" education provided in the future is of high quality. In the meantime, educational institutions can hold digital literacy workshops and mental health support sessions. Institutions must find a way to crowdsource funding for scholarships for financially disadvantaged students to show learners that they care and encourage youths to continue pursuing their education.

FUNDING

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to the safety and security of the respondents.

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