UNSEEN BARRIERS: HOW MYANMAR'S VPN SHUTDOWN IMPACTS MIGRANTS IN BANGKOK, CHIANG MAI, AND MAE SOT

OLIVER

THE RED FLAG

THE RED FLAG

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Abstract

The Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) shutdown imposed by Myanmar's State Administration Council (SAC) has created unprecedented challenges for its citizens, particularly affecting the Myanmar migrant community in Thailand who rely heavily on digital platforms for transnational family communication. This study investigates how the VPN shutdown impacts Myanmar migrants in three key Thai cities: Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Mae Sot. Through in-depth interviews with 20 participants, including migrant workers, students, Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) participants, activists, researchers, and experts from CSOs and NGOs, this research examines the multifaceted implications of digital communication barriers. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with diverse participants to capture detailed insights into their experiences and coping mechanisms.

The findings reveal significant disruptions in family communication patterns, with the frequency of contact typically reducing from daily interactions to weekly or bi-weekly contact. Participants face compound challenges: technical difficulties with unreliable VPN alternatives, increased communication costs, and deteriorating internet connectivity. The study identifies severe psychological impacts, including heightened anxiety about family safety, particularly for those with family, relatives, and friends in conflict zones. Migrants have developed various coping strategies, such as utilizing multiple VPNs, switching to alternative platforms, and relying on community support networks. However, these adaptations often prove insufficient, especially during emergencies or when coordinating critical financial support through remittances.

The research highlights broader implications for digital rights, access to information, and the maintenance of crucial family bonds during the political crisis. These findings

underscore the urgent need for technological solutions that can withstand the state's restrictions and for increased international attention to digital rights in Myanmar, while also highlighting the critical role of civil society organizations in supporting affected communities.

Introduction

Since the military coup in Myanmar in 2021, the State Administration Council (SAC) has systematically escalated its control over digital communications. While internet restrictions were already prevalent post-coup, the SAC took an unprecedented step in May 2024 by imposing a nationwide ban on virtual private networks (VPNs). This action effectively severed access to popular platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, which had been blocked in Myanmar since the coup and were only accessible through VPNs, marking a significant intensification of the junta's digital control strategy and effectively cutting off millions of Myanmar nationals from safe internet access.[1]

The VPN ban's implementation has been particularly aggressive, with military and police personnel across the country conducting phone searches, extorting money, and even arresting civilians found with VPN applications.[2] This enforcement is especially severe in conflict-affected regions such as Sagaing, Magway, Chin, Rakhine, Kachin, and Shan State, where control over information flow is crucial for the military's operations. The timing of this ban appears strategically calculated, as social media has emerged as a powerful tool for mobilizing public resistance and coordinating revolutionary activities against the military regime.

The SAC's approach to digital censorship reveals a calculated strategy. By selectively leaving platforms like Telegram and TikTok accessible while restricting others, the military appears to be creating a controlled information environment where pro-military channels can dominate the narrative. These unrestricted platforms have become vectors for military

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[1] South China Morning Post, 'Myanmar junta's VPN ban, internet controls expose citizens to more cyber threats', 11 August 2024

[2] Radio Free Asia, 'Myanmar junta imposes random searches for VPNs,' 13 August 2024

propaganda and hate speech, while simultaneously serving as tools to threaten and intimidate those who express opposition.[3] This selective censorship demonstrates the junta's intent to not merely restrict information but to reshape the digital landscape in its favor by providing alternative platforms where they can better control and promote their narrative.

While Facebook has implemented strict regulations and regularly bans pro-military accounts for spreading disinformation and hate speech, platforms like Telegram and TikTok maintain less restrictive content moderation policies. When pro-military accounts and military propagandists face bans on Facebook, they simply migrate to these alternative platforms where they can operate with minimal oversight. The growing popularity of these less regulated platforms in Myanmar has created new spaces where military propaganda and disinformation can flourish freely.[4]

The ban has also created severe challenges for local media and journalists, who now operate in an increasingly restricted environment with limited secure communication channels. In regions already affected by internet shutdowns, the ability to gather and verify information has become exceedingly difficult. Organizations like The Red Flag have attempted to address these challenges by providing digital security updates and reliable VPNs to members of the Myanmar Fact-Checking Network and Fellowship Participants, but these efforts face significant obstacles under the new restrictions.

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[3] Mizzima, 'How Myanmar lobbyists use Telegram to spread propaganda, fake news,' 9 Jule 2024

[4] Frontier Myanmar, 'Channelling hate and disinformation: Myanmar's bad actors move to Telegram,' 15 September 2023

channels. In regions already affected by internet shutdowns, the ability to gather and verify information has become exceedingly difficult. Organizations like The Red Flag have attempted to address these challenges by providing digital security updates and reliable VPNs to members of various journalism networks, including the Myanmar Fact-Checking Network (a coalition of independent local fact-checkers working to combat misinformation in Myanmar) and fact-checking fellowship programs (initiatives that support and train independent journalists in Myanmar for fact-checking capacities), but these efforts face significant obstacles under the new restrictions.

The cumulative effect of these restrictions extends beyond mere communication barriers. The military's selective approach - blocking Facebook while allowing platforms with less stringent content moderation like Telegram and TikTok - demonstrates a systematic strategy to control information flow. This calculated choice enables pro-military content to flourish on less regulated platforms while restricting access to spaces where independent voices and opposing narratives are more prevalent. The VPN ban thus represents a critical threat to information freedom and democratic resistance, not only undermining public access to accurate information but also hampering efforts to hold the regime accountable. This situation demands urgent attention from both local and international stakeholders to protect the free flow of information and support the Myanmar people's resilience against these increasingly sophisticated forms of digital repression.

Research Problem

The VPN ban enforced by Myanmar's State Administration Council (SAC) marks a significant escalation in the military junta's efforts to control information flow and restrict communication, both domestically and internationally. This ban, which came into effect

in May 2024, has profound implications, particularly for Myanmar citizens both within the country and abroad. The impact is especially severe on Myanmar migrants living in neighboring Thailand, in cities such as Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Mae Sot. These areas host substantial Myanmar communities, many of whom depend heavily on the Internet to maintain connections with their families and communities back home. Understanding their experiences serves two important purposes: it reveals the specific challenges faced by transnational communities in Thailand, and it provides insights into how digital restrictions affect Myanmar people across various locations who face similar barriers to information and communication.

Following the VPN ban, Myanmar residents have encountered unprecedented obstacles in accessing the internet freely. Many have turned to installing multiple VPNs due to the unreliable performance and frequent connectivity issues of these services. However, even when these VPNs are functional, users experience significantly reduced internet speeds, which makes accessing content difficult. This issue is compounded by the fact that, while some paid VPN options exist, they are often financially out of reach for many users, particularly in a country where the economic situation has worsened considerably since the coup.

The repercussions of this ban extend beyond Myanmar's borders. For Myanmar nationals in Thailand, especially those in migrant communities, the internet is a vital lifeline for staying connected with loved ones back home. The ban has drastically limited their access to uncensored news, social media platforms, and secure communication channels. This disconnection not only hinders their ability to stay informed about the situation in Myanmar but also isolates them from crucial support networks, deepening feelings of anxiety and helplessness.

Justification of the Study

This study is vital because communication plays a critical role in the lives of Myanmar migrants in Thailand, who depend on it not just for convenience but as a lifeline. It helps them stay emotionally connected with their families, keep updated on the safety and well-being of loved ones, and manage remittances, which are crucial for many families back in Myanmar. Disrupting these communication channels poses serious risks to the psychological well-being of these migrants, who are already dealing with the challenges of displacement, economic hardship, and cultural adaptation.

The VPN ban also represents a broader threat to digital rights and access to information, severely limiting the ability of Myanmar citizens to exercise their rights to freedom of expression and access to reliable information. This study will contribute to the growing body of research on digital repression and its impact on vulnerable populations, offering important insights into the specific challenges faced by migrant communities.

This research also aims to explore the wide-ranging impact of the VPN ban on these migrant communities, particularly how it disrupts their ability to communicate securely and consistently with their families and friends in Myanmar. The study will provide valuable insights into the coping mechanisms employed by the diaspora, assess the broader implications for digital rights and access to information, and examine the psychological impact of these disruptions on individual well-being. Additionally, the research will offer strategic recommendations for technology companies, such as Meta, and local civil society organizations (CSOs), guiding efforts to improve communication tools and support systems for affected individuals. By investigating these dimensions, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the VPN ban's consequences

for Myanmar's diaspora and suggest practical solutions to mitigate the impact of such state-imposed internet restrictions.

Research Objectives

1. Explore the Impact: Examine how the VPN ban disrupts the ability of migrant communities to communicate securely and consistently with their family, relatives, and friends in Myanmar.

2. Understand Communication Strategies: Investigate how the migrant diaspora overcame this impact and managed to stay connected with their loved ones in Myanmar despite significant communication barriers.

3. Assess Broader Implications: Evaluate the implications of these disruptions on digital rights, access to information, and the psychological well-being of the affected individuals.

4. Offer Recommendations: Provide recommendations for technology companies, such as Meta, and local civil society organizations (CSOs) to address the challenges posed by the VPN ban, aiming to enhance communication tools and support systems.

5. Bridge Knowledge Gaps: Fill gaps in understanding how state-imposed internet restrictions impact communication and access to information for vulnerable migrant communities, and propose actionable solutions to mitigate these challenges.

Research Questions

1. How has the VPN ban disrupted the ability of Myanmar's migrant communities to communicate securely and consistently with their family, relatives, and friends in Myanmar?

2. What strategies are employed by the Myanmar migrant diaspora to stay connected with their loved ones in Myanmar despite significant communication barriers?

3. What are the implications of these communication disruptions on the digital rights, access to information, and psychological well-being of Myanmar's migrant communities?

4. How can technology companies and local civil society organizations better support Myanmar's migrant communities in overcoming the communication challenges imposed by the VPN ban?

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study applied a qualitative research design to gain in-depth insights into the impact of the VPN ban on Myanmar's migrant communities. The methodology used semi-structured interviews to collect detailed personal experiences and perceptions regarding this issue.

Sites and Respondents

The research targeted 20 individuals, representing a diverse demographic profile, encompassing both male and female respondents between the ages of 22 and 40. The participants come from different regions and ethnic communities in Myanmar, representing a variety of experiences and backgrounds. Participants originate from major

urban centers such as Yangon and Mandalay regions, as well as from regions across the country including Ayeyarwaddy in lower Myanmar, Sagaing in the middle, and multiple ethnic states such as Shan, Chin, Rakhine, Mon, Kayah, and Kayin. The sample includes five key groups: students pursuing education across various academic disciplines and levels, selected to provide insight into the digital and communication challenges they face under the VPN ban; migrant workers employed in industries like construction, hospitality, and manufacturing, chosen to represent the experiences of those who rely on digital communication to maintain connections with their families in Myanmar; CDMers (Civil Disobedience Movement participants) who have fled Myanmar due to political repression, focusing on how the VPN ban and related digital restrictions impact their ability to communicate and organize; activists who are involved in advocacy related to Myanmar, providing insights into the challenges of conducting activism under digital surveillance and restrictions; and researchers and specialists who are working in different NGOs and CSOs that particularly focusing in digital rights, freedom of expression and human rights documentation to understand the context of the VPN ban and their expert opinion on the matter.
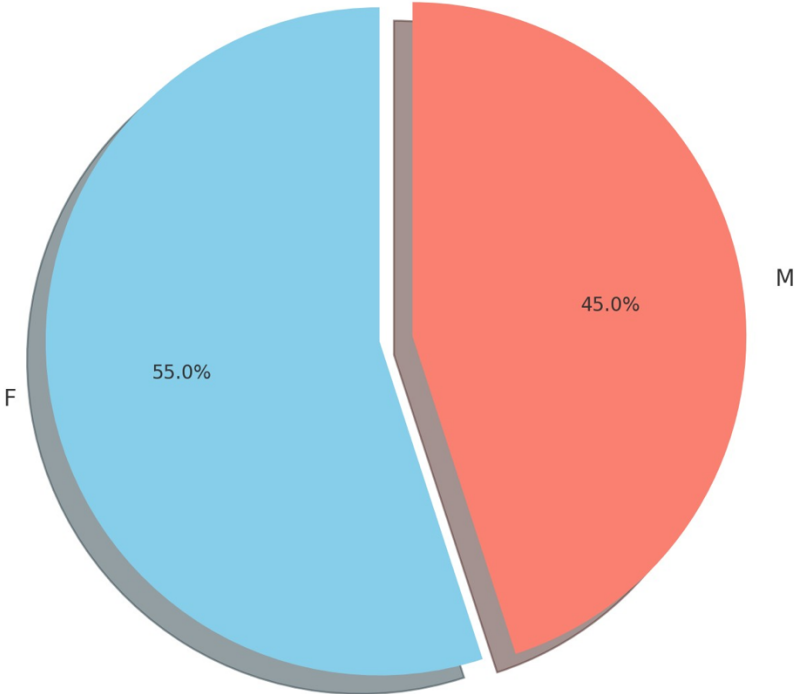
Fig-1: Gender Representation of Participants

These groups were drawn from Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Mae Sot, as these locations are key hubs for the Myanmar migrant communities in Thailand. Bangkok and Chiang Mai are major urban centers where many students and migrant workers have settled, offering a range of educational and employment opportunities. Mae Sot, located on the border with Myanmar, is a critical site for political migrants, CDMers, and activists due to its proximity to Myanmar and its role as a gateway for those fleeing the military regime. These locations were chosen to capture a comprehensive view of Myanmar individuals' diverse experiences and challenges in exile.
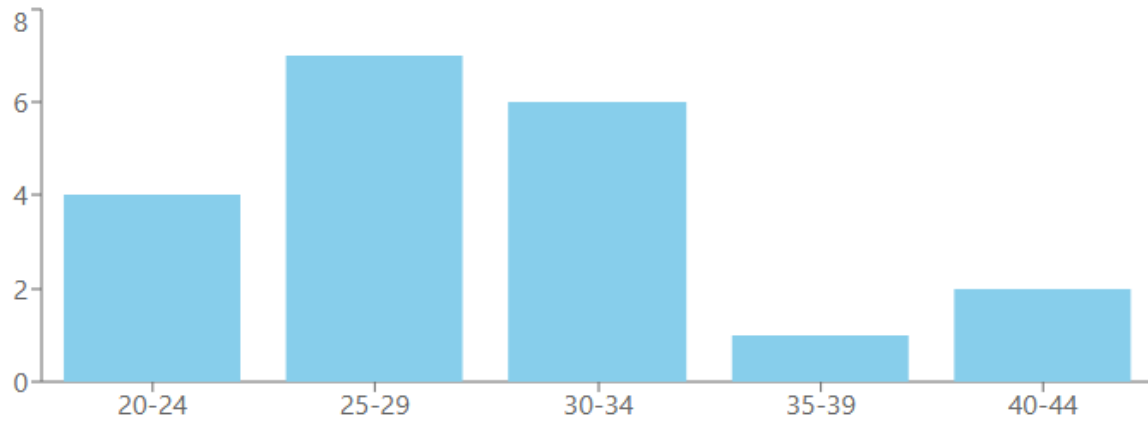
Fig-2: Age Distribution of Participants
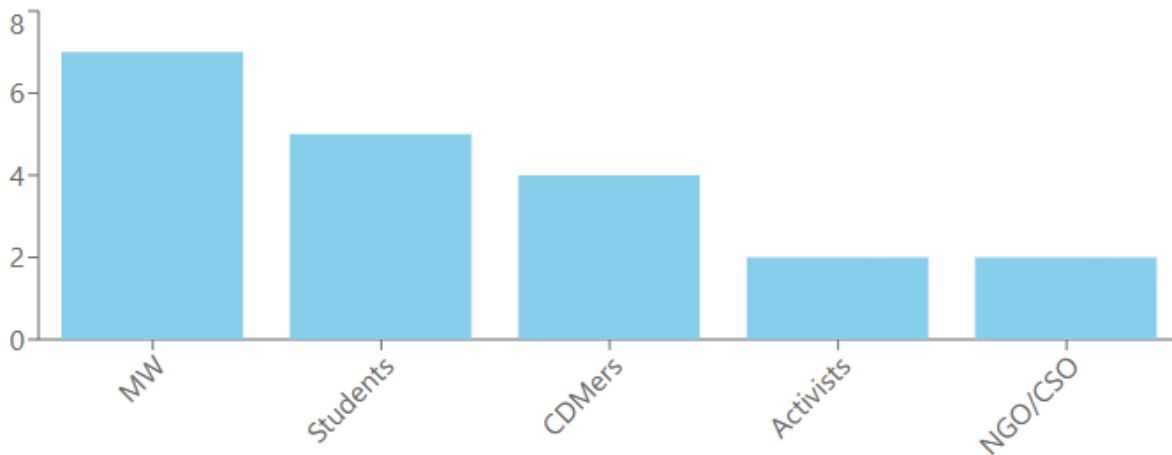
Fig-3: Distribution of Participants by Category

In addition to the primary research, interviews were conducted with representatives from two CSOs and NGOs which focused on human rights documentation, freedom of expression, and digital rights advocacy through research and awareness campaigns. These expert interviews provide valuable insights into how the VPN ban has impacted digital rights, access to reliable information, and communication for vulnerable populations in Myanmar. The informants shared their contextual understanding of the VPN ban, and potential long-term implications and offered recommendations for technology

companies on enhancing support for secure communication in restrictive environments. Their perspectives are crucial in understanding the broader implications of the VPN ban and developing effective responses to digital restrictions.

Sampling Method

The study used purposive sampling to select participants based on their direct relevance to the research topic. Gatekeepers within each community were engaged to identify potential interviewees who have experienced the impact of the VPN ban firsthand. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the VPN ban's effects, this research included a diverse group of participants, considering factors such as age, gender, and socioeconomic background. This includes balancing representation among different age groups, and genders, as well as those from various socioeconomic backgrounds.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews from September to November 2024 to explore participants' experiences and perceptions. These interviews were conducted in Burmese, both in-person and online, to accommodate participants' locations and preferences. With their consent, some interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed for further analysis.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify and explore patterns and themes within the interview transcripts. This process began with familiarization, where the researcher reads through the transcripts to deeply understand the data. Next, coding was applied to segments of text, tagging them with labels that represent key concepts and ideas. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflect overarching

patterns and insights. Finally, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately capture the essence of the data and align with the research objectives.

Ethical Considerations

Ensuring the ethical integrity and safety of the participants is a top priority in this study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they fully understand the research's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and how their data will be used. To maintain confidentiality, all data were anonymized, and recordings and transcripts were securely stored.

Limitations and Challenges of the Research

This research encountered several significant limitations and challenges that should be considered when interpreting its findings. The sensitive political context of Myanmar's VPN shutdown created substantial barriers to participant recruitment and data collection. Many potential participants expressed concerns about security risks and possible repercussions from the military regime, limiting both the sample size and the diversity of perspectives captured in the study. A particular challenge was reaching certain vulnerable groups, such as individuals who had fled Myanmar after being doxed by pro-military channels that exposed their personal information and urged their arrest. These potential participants were especially difficult to reach or declined to participate due to heightened security concerns. Despite assurances of anonymity, participating respondents also remained hesitant to share detailed information about their VPN usage and communication strategies or share their concerns, particularly regarding specific technical methods used to evade new restrictions or afraid that the military might step up the restriction based on their responses.

Another notable limitation was that some participants had minimal or no contact with their families in Myanmar, either by choice or circumstance, which limited their awareness of current VPN ban situations and its impacts. This gap in direct experience affected our ability to gather comprehensive insights about the ongoing effects of the restrictions.

The emotional nature of experiences, particularly regarding family separation and security concerns, may have influenced how participants remembered and reported certain events. The study's reliance on participant recall and geographical limitations presented additional challenges. Participants often struggled to provide precise timelines of their experiences with VPN restrictions and communication disruptions, potentially affecting the accuracy of the reported frequency of communication breakdowns and technical challenges encountered. While the study captured experiences from three key locations in Thailand (Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Mae Sot), it primarily reflected the perspectives of migrants who had the means and ability to leave Myanmar. The experiences of those who remained in Myanmar, particularly in rural or conflict-affected areas, could only be understood indirectly through participants' accounts of their family members' situations.

Technical limitations affected both the research process and its comprehensiveness. The very communication barriers being studied sometimes complicated the interview process, particularly when trying to verify information with participants' family members inside Myanmar. The rapidly changing nature of digital restrictions and VPN effectiveness meant that some reported experiences might have already been outdated by the time of analysis. While these limitations suggest the need for more robust methods in future research, particularly in reaching diverse participant populations and documenting real-time experiences, the study nonetheless provides valuable insights into how digital restrictions

affect transnational communities and highlights important patterns in how different populations adapt to communication barriers.

Research Findings

Communication Patterns

The implementation of Myanmar's VPN ban has fundamentally transformed how migrants in Thailand maintain contact with their families back home. Prior to the restrictions, participants maintained robust communication patterns characterized by frequent, often daily, interactions mostly through Facebook Messenger which is one of the most common communication apps in Myanmar. These regular exchanges, primarily conducted through video calls and instant messaging, served as vital links between migrants and their families, providing emotional support and real-time monitoring of family safety, particularly crucial for those with relatives in conflict-affected areas. For instance, a 24-year-old migrant worker from Mae Sot said he used to have regular contact with family back in his hometown, while a 32-year-old student in Bangkok mentioned that she maintained a minimum of two times daily communication with her parents. Another 22-year-old student from Bangkok also mentioned that he usually had dinner together with his family over a video call. A 33-year-old CDMer from Chiang Mai also responded that she has regular contact with her family and friends as well as colleagues who are still inside the country. This regular contact provided emotional support and allowed migrants to monitor their family's safety in real-time, which is particularly crucial for those with families in conflict-affected areas.
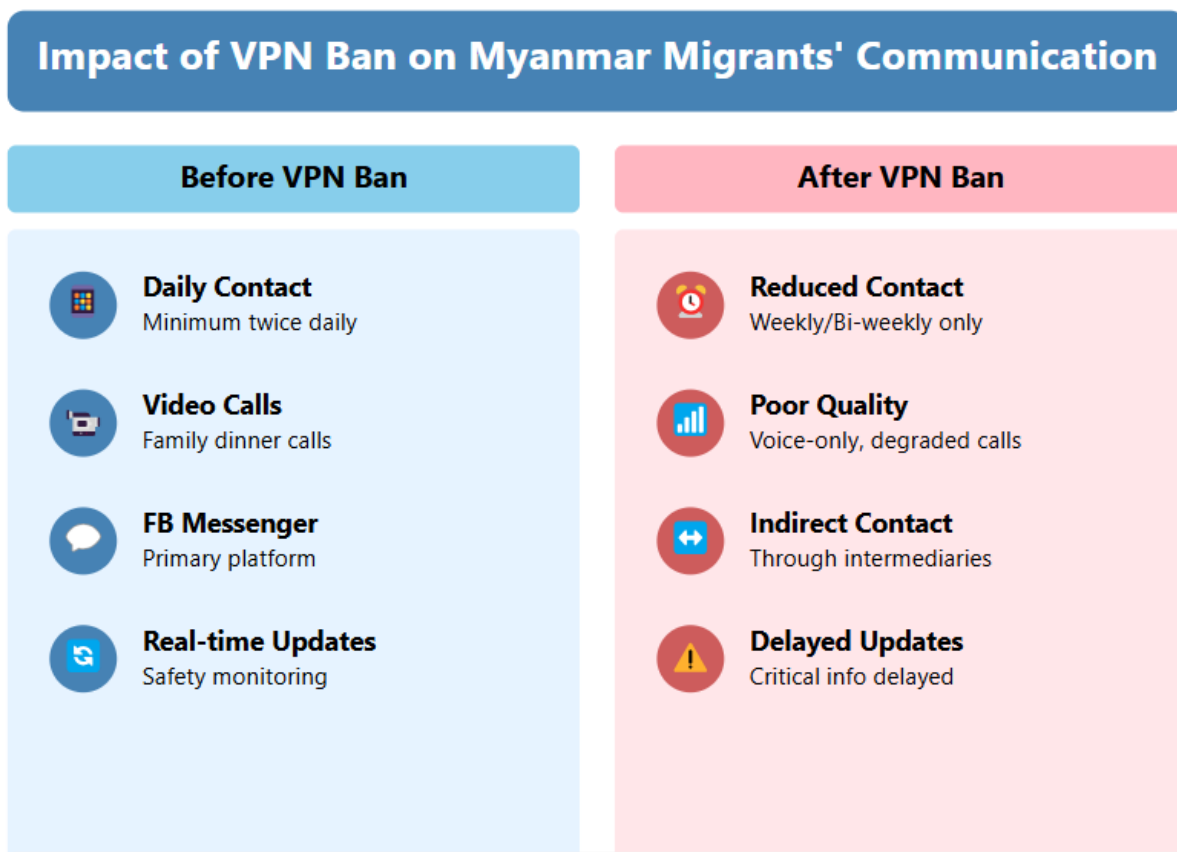
The introduction of the VPN ban precipitated a dramatic shift in these established communication patterns. Most participants reported a substantial decrease in contact frequency, with daily communications typically reducing to weekly or bi-weekly

interactions. As a 35-year-old student from Ayeyarwady region currently studying in Chiang Mai noted, "After the VPN ban, the frequency and capacity to connect to each other were reduced, especially when my parents or family members were going outside." This reduction was often compounded by deteriorating communication quality, with video calls becoming increasingly difficult or impossible, and voice quality suffering significant degradation. Another student from Chiang Mai's experience exemplifies this decline: "Sometimes we can only hear a voice and do not see the faces or make video calls, and sometimes the voice quality is not so good either."

More alarming are the instances of complete communication blackouts reported by several participants. A CDMer who has family and relatives in Rakhine State's account is particularly striking, "The SAC has completely shut down the internet in my region and it has been 4 months" (at the time of interview in October 2024). These blackouts have proven especially problematic during emergencies, with some areas experiencing disruptions in both internet and telephone communications, effectively cutting off all means of contact between migrants and their families.

The impact on emergency communications also has been particularly severe. Critical information often reaches families with significant delays, complicating emergency coordination and creating challenges in verifying family safety during conflicts. A 27-year-old activist who still has family and relatives in Mandalay region where armed conflicts were intensifying highlighted the emotional toll of this situation, he said: "It makes me increased worrying, anxiety and concerns about family especially when something happens in our area, such as a shooting, bomb explosion or arrest." These delays also affect practical matters, such as confirming financial transactions and remittances, adding another layer of stress to an already challenging situation.

The VPN ban has clearly disrupted the previously established communication patterns between Myanmar migrants in Thailand and their families back home. What were once daily video calls and instant messages have been reduced to less frequent, often lower-quality interactions, with some facing complete communication blackouts. This disruption carries significant consequences, from the practical challenges of coordinating remittances to the emotional strain of being unable to verify family safety during emergencies. As captured in participants' accounts, these communication barriers have created a persistent state of worry and uncertainty, particularly for those with families in conflict-affected areas.

Impact of VPN Ban on Myanmar Migrants' Communication

Before VPN Ban	After VPN Ban
Daily Contact — Minimum twice daily	**Reduced Contact** — Weekly/Bi-weekly only
Video Calls — Family dinner calls	**Poor Quality** — Voice-only, degraded calls
FB Messenger — Primary platform	**Indirect Contact** — Through intermediaries
Real-time Updates — Safety monitoring	**Delayed Updates** — Critical info delayed

Technical Challenges

The technical challenges that emerged from Myanmar's VPN ban have created a complex web of interconnected issues that significantly impact migrants' ability to maintain contact with their families, friends and colleagues. The primary challenge centers on VPN reliability, with participants consistently reporting problems with free VPN services. A student from Chiang Mai's experience reflects a common pattern, noting that "Free VPNs are not reliable and have to install and use many." Another student from Bangkok said, "Sometimes we are in the middle of a conversation, and suddenly the VPN drops, and we have to wait while they switch to another one. It is really frustrating". This unreliability has forced many families to install multiple VPNs, sometimes as many as ten different applications, switching between them as connections fail. The constant need to change between VPNs creates additional stress and interrupts communication flow, particularly affecting older family members who struggle with the technical aspects of managing multiple applications. Another participant testified that her father was very irritated by having to switch between many different VPN apps.

Internet connectivity issues compound these VPN-related challenges. Participants report that even when VPN connections are established, the overall internet speed and stability deteriorate significantly. Another student described that "Having to try out multiple VPNs significantly slows down the internet connectivity that was already in bad condition." This is particularly problematic in rural areas, where internet infrastructure is already limited. The situation is further exacerbated by frequent power outages which were becoming worse in both urban and rural areas, as reported by a migrant worker, who noted that "Apart from VPN problems, bad connectivity from WIFI internet and irregular access to electricity has also become a problem."

The financial burden of these technical challenges emerges as another significant issue. Participants report increased data costs due to the additional data consumption required by VPNs, the need to retry failed connections, and the data cost increased by the internet and telecom companies. A migrant worker from Mae Sot highlighted how "Paid VPNs are expensive, and they are out of reach in rural areas. We cannot buy them easily even if we have money." Some families report spending substantial amounts on internet access, with a CDMer residing in Mae Sot noting that "Sometimes they have to spend 5000/10000 MMK to use one hour of internet." He also added that sometimes his family members chose to spend that money to buy essential items rather than on the internet access which ultimately cut off their communication with their loved ones and access to information.

Digital literacy has emerged as a critical barrier, particularly affecting older family members in Myanmar. Many participants reported that their parents and elderly relatives struggle with the technical complexity of managing VPN applications. One of the participants described that, "Trying to use different VPNs to overcome the ban is especially difficult for parents and older relatives since they are not that familiar with the technology." This digital divide often necessitates support from younger community members, creating a dependency that can delay or prevent communication when such assistance is unavailable.

Alternative solutions, such as Starlink internet service, have emerged but remain inaccessible to most due to high costs and other unprecedented restrictions. Another migrant worker from Bangkok mentioned that while "Now using Starlink becomes an option, it is not always available and expensive." These limitations mean that most families must continue struggling with unreliable VPNs and poor connectivity, despite the availability of potentially better technical solutions.

These technical challenges create a cascading effect on various aspects of migrants' lives, from their ability to maintain family connections to managing practical matters such as financial transfers. The combination of VPN unreliability, poor internet infrastructure, financial constraints, and digital literacy barriers has created a particularly challenging environment for maintaining transnational family connections, forcing migrants and their families to constantly adapt their communication strategies while accepting significantly reduced quality and frequency of contact.

Technical Challenges After VPN Ban

VPN Reliability
- Need 4-10 different VPN apps
- Frequent disconnections
- Constant switching required
- Free VPNs unreliable

Internet Problems
- Slow internet speeds
- Poor rural infrastructure
- Frequent power outages
- Connection instability
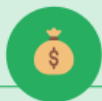
Financial Burden
- 5000-10000 MMK per hour
- High data consumption costs
- Expensive paid VPNs
- Competes with essential needs

Digital Literacy Gap
- Elderly struggle with VPNs
- Complex app management
- Need youth assistance
- Technical knowledge barrier

Psychological Impact

The VPN shutdown has inflicted significant psychological and emotional distress on both Myanmar migrants in Thailand and their families and friends in Myanmar, fundamentally altering their ability to maintain transnational connections. The research reveals multiple layers of psychological impact, ranging from daily stress to profound anxiety about family safety during emergencies.

For migrants in Thailand, the inability to maintain regular contact with their families and friends has created persistent anxiety and emotional strain. This is particularly evident in conflict-affected areas, where the lack of communication creates intense worry about family safety. A migrant worker from Mae Sot's experience vividly illustrates this concern: "Currently, in the area where my family and relatives are living, there are fighting and armed conflicts every day, and there is a regular risk of heavy weapons explosions and risk of landmines... I was afraid that they might be dead or injured or arrested by armed groups." This constant state of uncertainty about family well-being has become a significant source of psychological distress for many migrants.

The impact on emotional well-being is further complicated by the inability to share important life moments and seek emotional support from family members. A CDMer from Chiang Mai articulated this challenge emotionally, "It is mentally challenging for me when I want to contact my family and share my feelings but I cannot since they are not online... There were specific times when our problems were only to be shared with the family or only the family could understand these problems, and it is depressing to me when I cannot share them with my family." A student from Bangkok similarly shared his feelings "There are times when I need to discuss financial stuff with my parents such as for tuition fees or living expenses such as rent, I feel more anxious when I cannot get proper communication

with my family and the rents are due". This emotional disconnection has created a sense of isolation among migrants, particularly affecting those who fled Myanmar due to political circumstances or joined the Civil Disobedience Movement or young people who had to leave the country to avoid the military's forced conscription or to continue their education pursuit.

Moreover, safety concerns emerge as a dominant source of psychological stress, especially regarding the military's monitoring of VPN usage. One of the participants reported her family experiencing increased concerns and worries as the military arrested people who have VPNs on their mobile phones and extorted money, sometimes being detained. A 22-year-old student from Bangkok shared his experience "There was a case in my family's neighborhood where someone got checked by military and had to pay a lot of money because they found VPNs on their mobile phone." This security dimension adds another layer of anxiety, as families must constantly balance their need to communicate with the risks of detection. A migrant worker from Bangkok noted that many people leave mobile phones at home or use keypad phones while going outside as the military checks and arrests people if VPNs are found, creating additional stress about family members' safety during periods of disconnection.

Emergency communication has become a particular source of psychological burden. The inability to reach family members during critical situations creates intense anxiety and feelings of helplessness. One of the participants described "Increased worry, anxiety and concerns about family especially when something happened in our area, such as a shooting, bomb explosion or arrest." This anxiety extends to practical matters, as highlighted by another migrant worker from Mae Sot regarding "Significant delays in
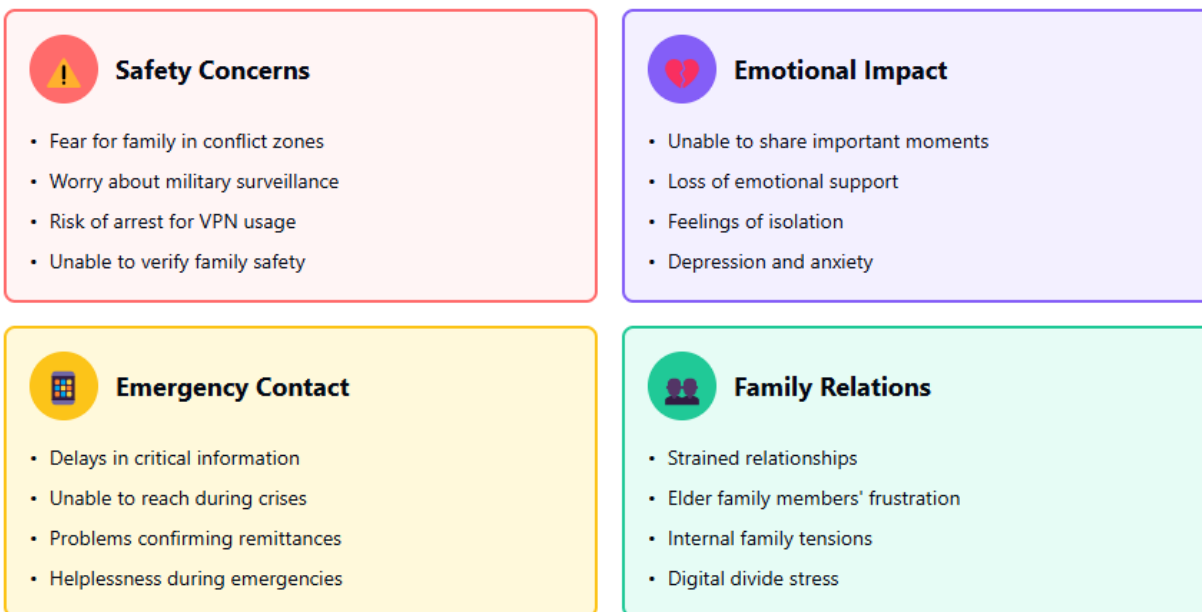
confirming remittance deliveries due to communication gaps... Stress-related to not knowing if a family has received funds or if issues arise in transfer completion."

For families inside Myanmar, the psychological impact manifests differently but is equally severe. They experience compound stressors related to both communication difficulties and security concerns. A migrant worker from Chiang Mai reported "Frustration and emotional conflict among family members since communication is not smooth and difficult," indicating how communication barriers strain family relationships and create internal tensions. The situation has created what another student from Chiang Mai described as a "Draining mental energy, time and money" scenario, where families must constantly navigate between maintaining contact and ensuring their safety.

The psychological impact appears particularly severe for older family members who struggle with technical solutions. One of the migrant workers noted that "Trying to use different VPNs to overcome the ban is especially difficult for parents and older relatives since they are not that familiar with the technology," adding frustration and feelings of helplessness to their already challenging situation. This digital divide creates additional stress as families become dependent on others to maintain basic communication.

The cumulative effect of these challenges has created a persistent state of anxiety and uncertainty that affects both migrants and their families. As one of the activists from Mae Sot expressed, "Before the VPN ban, even if I could see my family members are active on messenger (showing green), I felt relief because I know they are safe." This statement captures how even simple indicators of online presence once provided psychological comfort that is now lost, fundamentally altering the emotional landscape of transnational family relationships.

Psychological Impact of VPN Ban

⚠ Safety Concerns

- Fear for family in conflict zones
- Worry about military surveillance
- Risk of arrest for VPN usage
- Unable to verify family safety

💔 Emotional Impact

- Unable to share important moments
- Loss of emotional support
- Feelings of isolation
- Depression and anxiety

🔢 Emergency Contact

- Delays in critical information
- Unable to reach during crises
- Problems confirming remittances
- Helplessness during emergencies

👥 Family Relations

- Strained relationships
- Elder family members' frustration
- Internal family tensions
- Digital divide stress

Coping Strategies

The study reveals that Myanmar migrants and their families have developed various coping strategies to maintain communication in response to the VPN shutdown, demonstrating remarkable resilience and adaptability in the face of digital restrictions. Some have adopted a time-specific approach, establishing designated periods for contact attempts, typically during evenings or weekends. A 28-year-old migrant worker from Bangkok described that she maintains contact most of the time during weekends and at night on weekdays when she has off days and more free time to manage communication with family. Families have also increasingly employed a multi-platform approach, utilizing various communication apps simultaneously and sometimes reverting to traditional phone calls despite their higher costs.

Multiple VPN Usage has emerged as the primary coping strategy, though it comes with its own challenges. Participants report that their families typically maintain several free VPN applications simultaneously to ensure continuous communication possibilities. One of the participants described that "Most people, installed many VPNs (6-7) as they were not always working and reliable." This strategy, while common, creates additional complexity, particularly for older family members who struggle with technology. A migrant worker from Bangkok noted that "Family uses 4-5 free VPNs but often switches between them due to unreliability," highlighting the constant juggling required to maintain communication channels.

The adoption of alternative communication platforms represents another key adaptation strategy. Participants reported shifting their communication to various platforms less affected by the restrictions. A student from Chiang Mai mentioned that many people changed to other platforms (such as Viber, Signals, Telegram, etc) because having VPNs in the mobile phone is also risky. This multi-platform approach helps families maintain some level of contact, even when certain channels become unreliable or inaccessible. However, as another student noted, "Family members reduced their usage of internet due to increased price of internet and VPN issues. They only tried to connect to the Internet only when they wanted to contact us in case of emergency."

Community support systems have become crucial in helping families navigate these technical challenges. Young people in particular have emerged as key facilitators of communication. A young migrant worker described how communication now involves "Many steps (not direct communication) since families and relatives are not very familiar with technology and have to rely on other people's help to reach and contact family." This intergenerational support has become essential, with another migrant worker noting that

the family members get help from young people or mobile shops" to maintain communication channels.

In cases where direct communication becomes impossible, families have developed indirect communication methods. A migrant worker said, "I call my friend in Yangon and give him a message to relay to my family." These relay systems, while not ideal, provide a crucial backup for maintaining family connections. Some participants also reported reverting to traditional phone calls during emergencies, despite the higher costs involved. As a migrant worker from Bangkok mentioned, they sometimes "Call directly to the local number (which costs more and is expensive)" when other options fail.

Security-conscious behaviors have become an integral part of coping strategies as well as mentioned above in the psychological impact. Families have developed practices to minimize risk while maintaining communication. One of them described that whenever his family members go outside, they either uninstall VPNs from their mobile phones or carry a Keypad phone instead to be safe from the military's inspection. This careful balancing of communication needs with security concerns has become a daily reality for many families.

Some families have explored more advanced technical solutions. One of the migrant workers who has family and relatives in northern Shan state mentioned that 'Now they are able to use Starlink but it is not always available and expensive," highlighting how access to alternative internet services, while potentially beneficial, remains limited by availability and cost constraints.

These coping strategies, while demonstrating remarkable adaptability, often provide only partial solutions to the communication challenges faced by transnational families. As one of the activists reflected, "I feel anger because we have to do unnecessary things or extra

burdens due to the military's restriction. Access to information is one of our fundamental rights and it is being violated" This sentiment captures the frustration of having to develop and maintain complex workarounds for what was previously simple and direct communication.

Key Coping Strategies

🔄 Technical Methods

Multiple VPNs (6-7 apps)
Alternative platforms (Viber, Signal)
Starlink (limited availability)

👥 Community Support

Youth helping elderly
Mobile shop assistance
Message relay via friends

🔒 Security Practices

Uninstall VPNs when outside
Use basic phones in public
Emergency-only internet use

📞 Alternative Methods

Traditional phone calls
Indirect communication chains
Scheduled contact times

Broader Implications

The VPN shutdown's implications extend far beyond individual communication challenges, creating sequential effects on information access, social mobilization, human rights documentation, and community resilience. The VPN ban also represents a fundamental violation of digital rights and freedom of expression. One of the participants who is working as a researcher in an organization working for the Freedom of Expression emphasizes this as an immediate violation of access to information and digital rights as they restrict our freedom of speech and access to information. This restriction particularly affects information flow in conflict zones, where access to timely information can be life-critical.

The restrictions have significantly impacted information consumption patterns. One student participant shared how her parents were mentally burdened by having to uninstall/install VPNs whenever they have to go outside and they no longer want to do that and prefer to watch news on television instead. Another migrant worker similarly highlights that "Some people changed and relied on state-controlled media, which limits their understanding of the current situation," making it harder for them to make informed decisions during crises. This behavioral shift demonstrates how digital restrictions effectively channel people toward state-controlled traditional media rather than independent ones. As one researcher noted, "If they can control social media platforms, they will provide an alternative platform to promote their propaganda." When accessing independent news through social media becomes technically challenging or risky, people may default to more easily accessible platforms such as TikTok and Telegram, which have less stringent content moderation policies than Facebook, allowing military propaganda and disinformation to spread more freely**.** Others turn to state-owned television channels

which are free from the military's restrictions. This particularly affects elderly family members and rural communities, who may lack the technical skills or resources to consistently overcome VPN restrictions. Their increased reliance on state media further isolates them from independent information sources and potentially exposes them to military propaganda. This suggests that the impact of VPN restrictions extends beyond mere communication barriers to fundamentally reshape information consumption patterns, potentially strengthening the military's control over narrative and information flow within Myanmar.

The restrictions also have significant economic implications, particularly affecting remittance systems and local economies. A migrant worker from Mae Sot describes significant delays in confirming remittance deliveries due to communication gaps, creating financial uncertainty for families dependent on overseas support. A researcher working on the Freedom of Expression also points out broader economic consequences: "By restricting access to information, it can also impact the socioeconomic situation of the community (for example, they cannot know up-to-date information on the price of crops)." This lack of market information particularly affects rural communities, creating economic disadvantages and market inefficiencies.

The VPN ban has severely impacted the ability to document human rights violations and maintain accurate records of ongoing conflicts. Another expert, working in human rights documentation, notes that numbers of news were reduced or under-reported. So it has an impact on case documentation. This reduction in documentation capability has long-term implications for transitional justice, she also explains: "It can also affect the information and news for the media as well as transnational justice as the crime

committed by armed groups such as the military were not exposed and able to document due to the restriction of information."

The restrictions have significantly affected community organizations and resistance efforts. A researcher working on the Freedom of Expression notes that "Social media is now the best tool for mobilization of people during this revolutionary time." The VPN ban directly impacts this mobilization capacity, as one of the activist participants observes that "VPN ban has a broader impact especially during this revolution, as it can ultimately disrupt communication among the revolution groups in terms of fundraising, mobilization, and communication among groups."

The impact varies significantly between urban and rural areas, exacerbating existing digital inequalities. He also highlights this disparity: "The urban population has easier access to information as they can use other ways to get information such as sharing information in the local community, etc. The rural population has more difficulties." This divide is particularly pronounced in conflict areas, where one of the migrant workers reports complete communication blackouts lasting months.

The VPN ban has created new security vulnerabilities and surveillance risks. He points out that "Having a VPN application on mobile phones is criminalized and allows the military and police to do what they want to the public." This criminalization has led to what one of the students describes as "increased concerns and worries as the military arrested people who have VPNs in their mobile phones and extorted money, sometimes being detained."

The restrictions have disproportionately affected older generations and those with limited technical literacy. While he also notes that "Younger people are now being more creative and find innovative ways to overcome these challenges,". He also emphasizes that

"However, this is only very limited to a small group of the population." This generational divide is evident in a migrant worker from Chiang Mai's observation about how trying to use different VPNs to overcome the ban is especially difficult for parents and older relatives since they are not that familiar with the technology.

Both key informants and participants express concern about long-term implications for civil society and democratic space. A human rights documentation specialist predicts that restrictions to access to information will be more severe in the future, while a researcher working on Freedom of Expression sees the VPN ban as part of a broader strategy to control and limit civil society space. This aligns with participants' experiences of increasing isolation and disconnection from support networks and information sources.

These broader implications suggest that the VPN shutdown is not merely a technical restriction but part of a comprehensive strategy to control information flow, limit civil society space, and isolate communities. The effects ripple through all aspects of society, from individual family connections to broader democratic movements and human rights documentation efforts.

Key Implications of VPN Ban

⚖️ Rights & Information

Restricted freedom of expression

Forced reliance on state media

Limited independent news access

💰 Socioeconomic Impact

Disrupted remittance systems

Market information gaps

Rural-urban inequality

📝 Documentation & Justice

Under-reported human rights violations

Reduced conflict monitoring

Hindered transitional justice

🔒 Security & Surveillance

Criminalization of VPN use

Increased military surveillance

Risk of detention & extortion

Discussion

Analysis of key findings

The findings from this research reveal complex intersections between digital control, family relationships, and social resilience in the context of Myanmar's VPN shutdown. Several critical patterns emerge from the analysis that deserve deeper discussion.

1. Digital Control as Strategic Suppression

The VPN shutdown emerges not merely as a technical restriction but as a sophisticated tool of social control. The transformation of communication patterns from daily video calls to sporadic text messages demonstrates how digital restrictions effectively fragment transnational relationships. Particularly telling is the shift in media consumption patterns, where participants report family members reverting to state-controlled television when social media becomes too difficult to access. This aligns with what participants identified as the military's strategic approach to information control, suggesting that digital restrictions serve both immediate control purposes and longer-term goals of reshaping information consumption patterns.

2. Cascading Vulnerabilities and Social Inequalities

The research reveals how digital restrictions amplify existing social vulnerabilities rather than creating entirely new ones. The urban-rural divide becomes more distinct, with rural communities facing compounded challenges of poor infrastructure, higher costs, and increased security risks. The generational gap in technical literacy creates new dependencies, as elderly family members must rely on younger relatives for basic communication needs. These patterns suggest that digital restrictions function most effectively by exploiting and deepening pre-existing social inequalities.

3. Psychological Impact and Family Dynamics

The psychological implications of the VPN shutdown extend far beyond mere communication inconvenience. Participants' accounts reveal how digital restrictions reshape family relationships and emotional support systems. The loss of visual confirmation of family safety, particularly in conflict zones, creates persistent anxiety. The

inability to share daily experiences or seek emotional support or counsel from family and friends during difficult times fundamentally alters the nature of transnational family relationships. This emotional impact appears particularly severe for specific groups, such as CDM participants who fled Myanmar for political reasons.

4. Resilience and Its Limitations

While the findings demonstrate remarkable adaptability among affected communities, they also reveal the clear limitations of individual and community-level responses to state-level restrictions. The development of multiple coping strategies - from juggling multiple VPNs to creating relay communication systems - shows impressive resilience. However, these adaptations often prove inadequate for emergency situations and create new vulnerabilities, particularly regarding security risks from VPN possession. This suggests that technical solutions alone cannot adequately address the challenges posed by strategic digital restrictions.

5. Economic Implications

The research reveals significant economic ramifications of digital restrictions that extend beyond individual communication costs. Participants report increasing financial burdens from multiple sources: the need to purchase multiple VPN services, higher data costs due to unstable connections, and expenses related to alternative communication methods. More critically, the disruption of remittance systems creates financial uncertainty for families dependent on overseas support. As one participant noted, significant delays in confirming whether families received remittances add stress to an already challenging situation. The restrictions also affect market participation, with communities losing access to crucial information about prices and business opportunities. This economic impact

appears particularly severe in rural areas, where limited access to market information creates additional disadvantages for local businesses and agricultural decision-making.

6. Documentation and Accountability Challenges

The VPN shutdown has created significant barriers to documenting and reporting events within Myanmar, particularly human rights violations and conflict developments. The reduction in news reporting and documentation capabilities, as noted by participants working in documentation, suggests serious long-term implications for justice and accountability efforts. The inability to verify and share information about military actions, particularly in conflict zones, creates gaps in the historical record that may affect future transitional justice processes. This documentation vacuum is especially concerning given the ongoing political crisis and armed conflicts in various regions across the country. The restrictions effectively limit the ability of civil society organizations to maintain accurate records of events, potentially impacting future efforts to address human rights violations and pursue accountability.

7. Looking Forward

These patterns suggest the need for more comprehensive approaches to addressing digital restrictions. While technical solutions like alternative VPNs or satellite internet services offer some relief, the findings indicate that lasting solutions must address underlying structural inequalities and power dynamics. This requires coordinated responses across multiple sectors, from technology development to policy advocacy and community support systems.

The findings contribute to a broader understanding of how digital restrictions function as tools of political control while highlighting the resilience and adaptability of affected

communities. They suggest that protecting digital rights requires understanding them not as isolated technical issues but as fundamental to human rights and democratic governance in the digital age.

Recommendations

For Technology Companies

1. Develop communication platforms resistant to state restrictions

2. Create simplified interfaces for users with limited technical literacy

3. Implement more secure, user-friendly VPN alternatives

4. Consider satellite internet solutions like Starlink at affordable prices

5. Design offline capabilities for essential communication functions

For CSOs/NGOs

1. Establish collective networks for community internet access

2. Provide digital security training focused on older users

3. Create support systems for families facing communication barriers

4. Document and advocate against digital rights violations

5. Develop emergency communication protocols for conflict zones

6. Share information about reliable VPNs while considering security implications

For Policy Makers

1. Recognize internet access as a fundamental right

2. Develop frameworks protecting digital rights during political crises

3. Support international pressure against digital restrictions

4. Establish mechanisms for emergency communication in conflict zones

These implications and recommendations emerge directly from participant experiences and highlight the need for coordinated responses across multiple stakeholders. As one participant emphasized, "We need to take down the military junta since the control of the information and communication is under the de facto authority." This suggests that while technical solutions are crucial, addressing the broader political context remains essential for sustainable solutions.

Conclusion

The military regime's VPN shutdown in Myanmar represents a deliberate strategy of digital oppression that extends far beyond technical restrictions, fundamentally dismantling transnational family relationships, controlling information access for people inside Myanmar, forcing reliance on state-controlled media, and weakening civil society networks**.** Through an in-depth examination of 20 participants' experiences across Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Mae Sot, this research exposes how digital restrictions serve as a powerful tool for systemic control and social fragmentation, with implications that ripple through every aspect of migrant communities' lives.

Our findings reveal a disturbing pattern of how digital restrictions disproportionately target society's most vulnerable members. Rural communities face near-complete information blackouts, elderly family members struggle with increasingly complex technical requirements, and conflict-affected areas experience severe disruptions in emergency communications. While communities demonstrate remarkable resilience in

developing alternative communication strategies, these adaptations often create new vulnerabilities and prove inadequate for maintaining meaningful family connections. The psychological toll is particularly severe, with participants reporting profound anxiety about family safety and a persistent sense of helplessness during emergencies.

The impact extends beyond individual hardship to reshape broader social and economic structures. The shutdown creates significant barriers to documenting human rights violations, potentially affecting future justice and accountability efforts. Economic consequences ripple through communities as remittance systems falter and access to market information becomes increasingly restricted. More concerning is the emerging pattern of people reverting to state-controlled media when digital access becomes too challenging, effectively strengthening the military's narrative control.

These findings demand urgent, coordinated action across multiple sectors. Technology companies must prioritize developing communication platforms that remain accessible under restrictive conditions while resisting state control. Civil society organizations need to strengthen community support networks and advocacy efforts, particularly focusing on vulnerable populations. Most critically, policymakers must move beyond merely recognizing internet access as a human right and take concrete action to stop VPN bans, end internet shutdowns, and prevent digital surveillance - measures that are fundamentally at odds with the military regime's control strategy.

This research contributes crucial evidence of how digital restrictions function as tools of political oppression while highlighting the urgent need for an international response. As Myanmar's crisis continues, protecting digital rights becomes inseparable from defending basic human rights and supporting democratic movements. The experiences documented here demonstrate not just the devastating impact of digital restrictions but also the critical

importance of maintaining free and secure communication channels as a foundation for human dignity and democratic society.

The stakes of the VPN ban and restrictions extend beyond Myanmar's borders. As digital restrictions increasingly become tools of authoritarian control worldwide, the patterns and impacts documented in this research offer crucial insights for protecting digital rights globally. The international community's response to Myanmar's digital crisis may well set precedents for defending communication rights in future conflicts. Our findings make clear that protecting digital rights is not merely a technical challenge but a fundamental human rights imperative.

Acknowledge

UNSEEN BARRIERS: HOW MYANMAR'S VPN SHUTDOWN IMPACTS MIGRANTS IN BANGKOK, CHIANG MAI, AND MAE SOT

OLIVER

THE RED FLAG

THE RED FLAG