Can positive messaging on social media promote peacebuilding in Myanmar?

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Abstract:

Can positive messaging on social media promote peacebuilding in Myanmar? It is argued that social cognitive communication campaigns reversing negative symbolic interactionism on social networks could be the answer. This paper finds that there has been only one significant campaign, MIDO’s Pan Zagar, to use positive messaging on social media. Whilst the numbers of people that engaged with it suggest that this was popular, there is not enough evidence to determine if this had any behavioural change. However, an opinion survey and interviews show that there is potential to leverage counter narratives towards building peace – especially by harnessing the popularity of the major platform Facebook to both monitor and publish content influencing people towards peaceful behaviour.

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**Introduction:**

This thesis will argue that the use of positive messaging can promote the possibility of peacebuilding in Myanmar. It will draw on a literature review, desk research, opinion survey and interview with experts in the field to investigate the use of social media in the country in relation to intercommunal violence.

Theoretically, concepts of positive messaging – also known as counter speech – and interventions based on reinforcing affirmative ideas on social media can have an impact on the complex peacebuilding efforts. The definition of positive messaging and counter speech used here are in reference to specifically proactive campaigns that are designed to use language that acts as a direct antithesis to negative communication. That is to say, whereas there are plenty examples of hateful, malicious and false information being used to foster divisions and conflict, there are fewer significant attempts to use positive and encouraging ‘nice’ language as a tool to build peace.

The attempts to monitor, track and curtail hate speech, although relevant in part, particularly in relation to the on-going Rohingya crisis in Rakhine state, is not the focus of this research. This is due to the restrictions in finding balanced or reliable accounts, the safety of sources, access to the area geographically (this also the case for the other conflicts in the country).

The research methodology used is based on qualitative, rather than quantitative, information gathered. This due to the limitations as described above, and the need to produce a concise final analysis within the word count allowed. The opinion survey was conducted online it was posted to Facebook in a closed group and aimed at gathering responses from people with high awareness of the effectiveness of messaging online. In this sense it was a focussed and targeted survey, but did not go further to canvas a broader section of society, and there was a lower than expected response rate, which may have affected the final findings.
The interviews conducted with experts in the field for this paper provided genuine insight – there was a time constraint meaning that additional follow-ups could not be made.

In addition, an analysis of one-month’s media monitoring was carried out to show the coverage of the issues in the press, which reveals how well social media stories are being received by the journalists and exposed to the general public.

There is a unique opportunity, however, to examine how a country that has only very recently had mass access to new forms of mobile communications has used them to intervene in long running internal disputes and intercommunal violence. Access to technology has in recent years both aided development through connectivity, and also been used for political gains. This has implications the field of communication for development, in looking at how communications and social theories can be used to provide interventions that transform lives in a place that is experiencing on-going developmental and economic challenges. Traditionally, one of the major successes in providing information to the closed off country was via exiled broadcast and print media. Now social networking has provided new tools to leverage counter narratives towards change and peace.

Social media in Myanmar

Hearing the common refrain: ‘In Myanmar Facebook is the internet (Roache, 2018)’ is equally both an unhelpful cliché and a perfect summation of the situation in Myanmar. For many people, their portal to the internet is certainly not via a browser into the world wide web, it is through the blue and white F application icon on their smartphone. ‘Facebook is used as a search engine in Myanmar, and many businesses have a Facebook page but not a regular website’ (Parikh, 2017). This is because of the explosion of mobile phone ownership, brought about by a change in government policy to open up the telecommunications market in 2013.

Although the picture is rapidly changing and reliable data is not readily available, it is said that now 95% of people - 50 out of 53 million (Kanale, 2017) - have a mobile phone, according to the latest Kepios findings. It is difficult to estimate exactly how
many smart mobile phones (typically touchscreen, 3G or 4G capable) are in the hands of Myanmar citizens, but reports point to varying but consistently high numbers between 70% (Peel, 2017) and 80% (Vota, 2015) of the country’s mobile connections. That’s higher than the Asia-Pacific average of 53 per cent and even the European level of 68 per cent, according to GSMA Intelligence, an international industry body’. (Peel, 2017).

In terms of the effect this has had on economic development it is said that ‘over the next 15 years an estimated 250,000 job opportunities are believed to be created in the country as a result [of investment in telecoms] and contribute to more than 5% of the country’s GDP’. (Mizzima, 2017). This is a giant leap for a country in which agriculture was ‘the primary source of livelihoods, not just for half the poor, but also for nearly half of all households’ (World Bank Group, 2014). Livelihoods across all sectors of industry are boosted by the uptick in telecommunications.

Social media itself is hugely influential in Myanmar, perhaps more so than in countries where the market for information is more mature and have an established trusted mainstream media. It is often cited that ‘for those with access, the mobile internet and social networking is becoming their primary source of news’. (Spirit et al, 2016). In particular, the ease of access to information has facilitated change and discourse that bypasses the previously tightly controlled media and press. It ‘played a big role in spreading State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi’s democratic message’ (Parikh, 2017). The same apps which are improving the agriculture and pastoral sectors by providing raw data and information, are also including social functionality that connects people via chat. ‘Chat forums are connecting farmers, allowing them to swap tips while experts are on hand to answer queries’ (AFP, 2018), which shows that Myanmar has truly embraced the possibilities that the new connectivity has afforded them leading to greater economic benefits throughout society and not just for the urbanised middle or upper socioeconomic groups.

The general uptake and usage of telecommunications and internet services has led to Myanmar being described as a ‘leapfrog nation’, whereby traditional media, technologies and services familiar to developed countries have effectively been bypassed as the country skips these iterations and embraces modern practices. This is
seen in sectors such as: agriculture (as mentioned); banking (with a majority of people unbanked, mobile payments have begun to fill the space) and transport (with ride-hailing apps becoming widespread).

Crucially the press is being transformed by the changes to digital technology and with it its relation to social media. It is important to note that the free press in Myanmar is nascent, only since ‘the adoption in 2014 of the Printing and Publishing Enterprise Law (PPEL), which officially abolished past prior censorship and allowed newspapers to become editorially independent from the state’ (International Media Support, 2016) and the broadcast law of 2015 have allowed a diverse range of public, private, mainstream and ethnic media to begin to flourish. Although in many ways the sector can boast a multitude of print publications and of those many are printed in minority languages, they are often have a ‘limited circulation of a few hundred copies per issue’ (International Media Support, 2016).

Despite the liberalisation of first the print and then broadcast media, there are still obstacles regarding obtaining a licence for new TV and radio stations with five new channels only being granted in 2017. There is also a campaign, some might say of fear, run by the government against journalists and media houses. This is most evident by (at the time of writing) the trial of two Reuters journalists arrested under the colonial-era Official Secrets Act for reporting on the mass graves of massacred Rohingya people discovered in Rakhine state. Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo were held for ‘simply doing their jobs’ (Reuters Staff, 2017).

The private press has to contend with state controlled broadcast and print media – which are rarely critical of the government and even more rarely admonish the military. In a recent article ‘U Thet Swe, general manager of the Ministry of Information’s News and Periodicals Enterprise, said the circulation of state-run newspapers totalled about 380,000...[which] equals that of all private sector newspapers and journals combined’ (Soe, 2018).

The real spread of information is via social media channels, with content being transmitted amongst communities virulently and speedily. Media houses have of course taken advantage of the social media revolution, and all have Facebook pages
that have many more followers than they could possibly hope to achieve in print. For example, Eleven Media group have more than 16m followers on their Facebook page, but a circulation of only a few hundred thousand.

News travels fast and there are steps being taken to stop false information from gaining ground. However, for context it should be highlighted in this introduction issues to do with the relationship people have with their social media accounts differs to that which is traditionally accepted in more developed markets, and has implications for the use of counter speech or positive messaging.

Outside of the urban areas digital literacy is low. Telecommunications companies such as public-private partnership run Myanmar Posts and Telecoms (MPT) run outreach programmes such as ‘Digital Skills to Go Forward’ in order to bridge the gap between the connectivity they provide – up to 98% population coverage (Kyaw, 2017) – and the knowledge of their users. Many people in Myanmar, especially until a few years ago, never owned an email address and relied on shop services to set them up with accounts on social media platforms.

Figure 1:

LEFT: September 2014, 70pc coverage of the population. RIGHT: March 2016, 95pc coverage of the population. Images: MPT & Trautwein, 2016
They all have a phone, however, and are familiar with using social apps, games and other smart functionality such as the camera. ‘29 percept of Myanmar’s population has a Facebook account... for 15-65 in the census the proportion would be 44.4 percept’ (Samarajiva, 2017). It is not uncommon for people to have multiple accounts on Facebook, and even their main one is not under their real name. This affords people a certain kind of anonymity, either for hiding activities from overly concerned parents or from the eyes of a government that is still wary of free speech.

State and non-state actors influence what can and cannot be said online. ‘Governments, corporations, political organisations, religious institutions and individuals all feel they have a stake in dictating what can and can't be said on the internet’ (Abbott, 2017). These competing actors use social media tools as a platform to push their agenda and ‘can play a major role in feeding rumour mills that drive conflict in divided societies’ (Parikh, 2017).

What this all amounts to is a complex modern background against which the older ingrained conflicts play out – a cyber-battlefield where some people are experimenting with a counter narrative to halt the advance of actors on both sides and bring about a better result.

**Conflicts in Myanmar**

The growing use of social media has intensified offline struggles online. This has deeper implications for the nation’s conflicts and intercommunal violence, which are widespread. A recent report by The Asia Foundation found that ‘subnational conflict in Myanmar is not a peripheral issue. More than one-third of the country’s 330 townships are affected’ (Burke et al, 2017). They also cover a remarkable swathe of the country.

**Figure 2:**
Broadly speaking Myanmar experiences violence due to the tension between those that want a centralised government to rule with a strong national military presence and those which are fighting for more de-centralised federal system where ethnic groups have more representation and autonomy. The Asia Foundation has identified over twenty independent ethnic armed organisations in Myanmar, coming into frequent conflict the state’s military.

There have been many attempts to consolidate, negotiate and move towards peaceful resolution in the form of ceasefire agreements and national all stake-holder lead peace conferences. The first and most famous of which was held in 1947 in Panglong, Shan State by General Aung San – just before Myanmar gained independence. This had promised the major ethnic groups a move towards self-determination and a federal style Union in which states could decide to secede if they wanted to.
However, throughout the 20th century these promises failed to materialise and armed conflict has become a way of life in many areas of the country. ‘Ethnic divisions, greatly exacerbated during the colonial era, are cemented in law and in social norms in Myanmar’ (Burke et al, 2017), which makes it increasingly difficult influence and amend into positive action. In 2015 twenty-one ethnic armed organisations were engaged in the nationwide ceasefire agreement process (Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2015), yet disagreement and violence persisted. In 2016 Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of General Aung San, attempted to kick start the 21st Century Panglong process, with a series of conferences aimed at taking ‘a significant step on the path toward "peace, national reconciliation, and the emergence of a democratic federal Union."’ (Qingrun, 2017).

Despite these interventions and progress towards peace, as Myanmar has emerged from military rule and has been in transition towards a more democratic system under the NLD, these tensions have continued to manifest in armed conflict which has had disastrous and deadly consequences.

‘In the three-year period between 2014 and mid-2017 at least 600 people were killed and 700 injured as a direct result of armed conflict in Shan and Kachin States in northern Myanmar’. (Burke et al, 2017). Many more people have fled due to the violence and become internally displaced or move to semi-permanent camps on the border with neighbouring countries, especially Thailand.

The complexity of the landscape is underpinned by how much weight and energy is given over to satisfying the demands of a myriad of different groups, all of which have an agenda that is either different to each other, or more importantly at odds with the mainstream government’s plans. Again, to illustrate ‘Myanmar boasts 135 ethnic groups recognised by the Government’ (International Media Support, 2016)

It should also be noted that the government also chooses not to recognise some self-identifying groups such as the Rohingya (also other minorities) as a constituent ethnic group of the country, which has further fuelled the negative perception towards them. Over a million people have been left with no route to citizenship, because they are not counted among the 135 so called ‘national races’. Conversely, it
is argued by Myanmar nationalists that this is a valid position to take, saying that they are immigrants or descendants of immigrants from outside the country, and not entitled to classification in the same way as other ethnicities. This leads to a further sense of ‘otherness’ for a minority group, increasingly marginalised by the state, excluded from the national peacebuilding process. For example it is said that they are even denied their right to self-determination, with the debate raging about nomenclature ‘the government decided the Rohingya could only register [for a national census] if they identified as Bengali instead.’ (Albert, 2018).

There is a difference, then, between the efforts to bring about peace between the officially recognised ethnicities of the Union of Myanmar and the on-going struggle of the Rohingya people to have their rights granted to them or even to have their voices heard within the country. The situation is highly fraught. Part of the reason why there has been such a focus on combatting hate speech online in Myanmar is in response to the way in which the Rohingya crisis has evolved. In a time where the spread of information is becoming increasingly easier due to the proliferation of telecommunications and social media, as introduced above, ‘mismanagement of inflammatory rumours, [has] led to deaths and the destruction of homes and businesses’. (Jarvis-Norse, 2017, p. 6).

Language is key to the notion of positive messaging. One of the main challenges to reconciliation and peacebuilding is that not only is there a plurality of ethnic identities in Myanmar, this is mirrored by a number of minority languages. There are one hundred and eighteen living languages that have been classified in Myanmar (Simons, 2018) ‘This rich diversity adds to the challenge of peacefully building national cohesion by establishing sufficient consensus to avoid long-term subnational conflicts’ (Burke et al, 2017).

The major languages in Myanmar are that of the two largest ethnic groups – Bamar and Shan. Whilst virtually the whole population can speak or read some Burmese, many rural people from other ethnicities struggle for fluency. Roughly 42m people have Burmese and 3m understand Shan. (Simons, 2018). Language is deeply political, even along religious lines, to the point where there is a manifestation of ‘Myanmar Buddhist nationalism which will discriminate against minority religions
as much as against minority languages and cultures’ (Smith, 1994) adding to the layers of complexity that make up the conflict situation in Myanmar.

Finally, to end this introductory section on both social media and conflict, there is one last battle line drawn over language which is having a profound influence on the nature of any possible social media messaging campaign. It is due to the relative isolation of Myanmar from the rest of the world and the previous lack of investment in telecommunications. Now that has been addressed the showdown has begun between an established and incumbent local entity and the international heavy weight: it is Zawgyi vs Unicode. As explained in a recent article 'because the internet was so slow to come to Myanmar, developers there created their own font for the Burmese script called Zawgyi’ (Frenkel, 2016). This is at odds with the standard Unicode system accepted by virtually all computers and smartphones, which allows them to read, display, search and index in any language.
Literature Review:

This section will examine the available articles and resources that are already available in relation to the subject matter. One of the reasons why the title of this thesis was chosen is because there has not been a great deal of academic research into this subject in Myanmar. At the time of writing there is one major doctoral research study that has just begun ‘early 2018’ entitled ‘Social Media in Armed Conflict through a Gender Lens: The Case of Myanmar' to be written by Julie Marie Hansen. That paper is part of a larger project on ‘Social Media in Armed Conflict: The Case of Myanmar’ led by Stein Tonnesson at The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). Due to the fact that this is in its early stage of inception and the research has not yet been carried out, it is not referenced here.

However, there are some interesting and relevant papers that should be examined, which provide evidence in support of the argument that positive messaging on social media can promote peacebuilding in Myanmar – others place caveats on how far social networking can go in tackling these issues.

Papers on Myanmar

Beginning with the Search for Common Ground key findings on ‘Stakeholder mapping of countering hate speech in Myanmar’. The paper underlines the points made above in the introduction, that the majority of hate speech conducted online is made through the Facebook platform. This is against the background of intercommunal violence exacerbated by ‘a rumour or a photo, which was spread widely online’. The lure of exciting but incendiary content in Myanmar, as is the case in other countries and over other platforms around the world ‘has seen the development of echo chambers, where extremist views are easily propagated’ (O'Connor, 2018).

Data collection for information was conducted over a short period in 2017 and lists a number of limitations to the stakeholder mapping exercise that are also reflected by the limitations found in this thesis’ research. Namely, the fact that many organisations that are involved in countering hate speech are doing so in an
uncoordinated manner, and most (if not all) are based in the commercial capital of Yangon. This geographical and ideological frame means that whilst there are examples and case studies of interventions against hate speech, there is very little data about the effectiveness or impact thereof. A conflict analysis and monitoring of the counter speech would need to be conducted in order to get empirical data that supports evidence of any change. The recommendations paper finds that despite a number of initiatives that are being run by civil society ‘little research exists on the impact of these initiatives and without evidence of impact…it is challenging to measure and address’ (O’Connor, 2018).

What is found, however, that whilst the actions organisations are not readily measurable, they do have less tangible results in ‘promoting civic engagement, democratic values and interfaith understanding.’ (O’Connor, 2018). These indirect strategies are said to mitigate the effects of hate speech, and may do more through their participatory and inclusive methods of creation than as a direct result of the campaign themselves. The use of social media means that some information can be gathered by collecting the number of likes or engagement with the posts – but it is more difficult to track any meaningful behaviour change as a result.

The report also notes that the lack of technical ability in both digital literacy and experience in peacebuilding are barriers to interventions being truly affective. This, as touched upon in the introduction, is changing at a broader societal level, and with programmes run by the telecommunications sector, however for targeted positive messaging and counter speech the maturity level and expertise in this field is low.

This feeds into a second, more in-depth Search for Common Ground report that has relevance for examining whether or not positive messaging can have an impact. This is a recent ‘Viewership and Listenership Survey’ carried out the inform multi-media campaign, which Search for Common Ground is preparing with Myanmar Radio and Television (MRTV) as part of the 12-month “Let’s Think, Let’s Change: Promoting Diversity through Popular Culture” (Zongollowicz, 2017). It is a communication for development programme and the paper analyses data collected about their intended audiences in order to better understand the creation of content.
Using fieldwork and opinion surveys, it takes a more in-depth look at the various channels used by audiences in Lashio and North Okklappa (Yangon). It included this telling footnote about language which is enlightening to how building a positive messaging campaign will be dependent on locally appropriate linguistics.

The question of race, ethnicity and religion are wrought in Myanmar with the tendency to roll the three into one. This is facilitated by the Burmese language, which does not automatically distinguish between the three concepts the same way that the English language does (Zongollowicz, 2017, p.13)

The research corroborated what we know about smartphone use, ‘94.6% of women and 96.9% of men’ had access to the internet on their phone in Lashio. Furthermore 85% of respondents said that they used social media to get their news. Interestingly the research found that the majority of young people who say that they get their news from social media sources are broadly sceptical, and ‘tend to rely on family and friends to discuss worrisome information and to establish the veracity of certain news’ (Zongollowicz, 2017, p. 7). This however could lead to the situation whereby bias and prejudice are reinforced, rather than tempered due to the effect of the echo chamber - i.e. only surrounding yourself with people that think in the same way as you.

The second most common way that people received their news was via ‘reading comments’ (Zongollowicz, 2017, p.7). Zonogollowicz recognises that this is a huge risk with regarding this as a genuine source of news due to ‘people’s opinions - however biased, prejudiced or misinformed - become legitimate information possibly contributing to the spread of false information’.

The report makes the recommendations based on these challenges to set up interactive training sessions in order to promote critical thinking and fact-checking, in order to combat prejudice on social media. It could be argued that this would not have a wide-reaching effect – unless the sessions were run on a very large scale and in a way that was accessible to the people that are most likely to spread discord on social media.
Indeed in an interview with the Myanmar ICT for Development Organisation (MIDO) Rainer Einzenberger asks about how radical groups have used new media, to which the reply from Htaike Htaike Aung, co-founder and executive director, is what has come to be expected in the context of Myanmar: "Okay, if it’s on the Internet it must be right". This really is dangerous, particularly if there are people who are using the Internet for the wrong agenda and propaganda’. (Einzenberger, 2016).

MIDO are the go-to organisation for the most developed thinking on positive messaging and this will be expanded on in my own interview with the organisation in this thesis.

Much of the methodology for counter speech interventions have focused creating counter narratives either through dialogue or specific messaging over traditional media and by posting comments or creating content that promotes the positive ideas directly on social platforms. MIDO’s approach is to create an ‘anti-hate speech campaign…called Pan Zagar campaign’ (Einzenberger, 2016). Pan Zagar means flower speech and is meant to introduce positive messaging into society – both online and through physical leaflet distribution.

The Search for Common Ground paper identified that there were ‘individuals influenced by a campaign who have expressed changed attitudes as a result of their campaign’ (O’Connor, 2018, p 7) on social media – showing that there was evidence for the effectiveness of this kind of work. However, it should be noted that this comment was not referenced back to a specific quote to MIDO or any other organisation, but is a conclusion drawn from the qualitative interviews that were made during that stakeholder mapping exercise.

Other organisations work towards producing counter narratives to go against the ‘wrong agenda and propaganda of extremists’. For example, Religions for Peace Myanmar also use ‘positive messaging and counter narratives; and programs to prevent and respond to social hostility’ (Religions for Peace, 2018), but do not have readily available literature on these programmes. In order for NGOs and international organizations to harness the power of social media for good, its
introduction must also go hand-in-hand with education. Citizens need to learn how to distinguish fact from fiction, and to be critical of various narratives. (Parikh, 2017)

Other examples of social media in conflict situations

What is the broader nature of peacebuilding using counter speech? Whilst there is a dearth of information on interventions in Myanmar, there is academic, civil society and public research on the subject drawing from other contexts.

For example, the Arab Spring was one of the first widely studied events that had a heavy involvement of social media, with many crediting the spread of anti-government and revolutionary sentiment coming from social media platforms. ‘In the Tunisian case, social media played a profound role in breaking down a closed authoritarian regime (Keasley, 2014 p. 274). This chapter in Building Peace from Within cautions against making the internet and social media into a panacea that can transform authoritarian governments and societies into democratic ones overnight, no matter how tempting it may be to do so. One of the lessons that could be taken from the Tunisian experience is that ‘democratisation depends on linking online debate to offline social action’ (Keasley, 2014, p. 275). As found so far from the available information, this is a key aspect of the approaches in Myanmar. To offer not only an online but also and offline counter narrative. Policy recommendations from the Tunisian case also include notes of caution – remarking that social media communities ‘can make democratisation more accessible as a grassroots effort, but one lesson from studying social media is that its outcomes are not always easily predictable’ (Keasley, 2014, p. 278) – or in some cases measurable.

In the context of Arab spring, the use of social media was broadly revolutionary however, rather than being used to incrementally build a peaceful narrative. Language used to describe the events that occurred around 2010 is more active, describing ‘mobilization’, ‘revolution’, ‘cascade’ – as is found in this article New Political Science journal that examines the use of social media, it is outlined as an ‘instrument of domestic and international revolutionary contagion’ (Tudoroiu, 2014, p. 346). In comparison to Myanmar, the civil society action against the government or against a certain hate speech narrative during the Arab Spring was built much
more quickly and cohesively in order to meet the aim of toppling a regime. As Tudoroiu comments, ‘Arab countries have provided a good example of how virtual and public spaces come into a mutual synergy and produce a formidable potential for mobilizing a broad variety of actors’ (Tudoroiu, 2014, p. 349). This contrasts with the way in which the research from Myanmar indicates that the social media movements are not unified or organised systematically – the Search for Common Ground paper says both that ‘actors monitoring hate speech have difficulty coordinating their actions’ and ‘have difficulty developing creative and strategic approaches to counter hate speech’ (O’Connor, 2018, p. 7). When there is no well-defined adversary, the movement to counter a more abstract concept is tougher.

Perhaps this indicates the challenge for organisations in Myanmar – it is easier to spread the language of violence and of action, but harder to build notions of peace more comprehensively. It could be due to the ephemeral nature of social media posts and that the chain of virulence moves quickly when content is both linguistically and visually arresting, adding to its so-called share-ability.

‘Talking about violence is easy. Talking about peace is hard.’ (Hallowell, 2016). According to available literature, a successful approach to creating positive messaging is to set up a more structured environment based on target audiences, researched segments and the right content. ‘Research also shows that sharing solutions-oriented messages can help readers feel empowered to take action’ (Hallowell, 2016) - A toolkit for communication of an opportunity agenda recommends ‘leading with shared values; promoting solutions; evoking familiar themes and metaphors; telling a systemic story’ (Fisher-Rowe, 2015, p.13). In Myanmar if the aim is to build peace then ‘best way to counter false information is to tell our affirmative story in ways that overcome the other side’s falsehoods’. (Fisher-Rowe, 2015, p. 16).

**Journalism**

In the field of journalism, counter-reporting by journalists is an important constituent part of improving trust in information and overcoming false reports or government controlled stories. In Myanmar the role of the private and minority
ethnic media is vital to this, but peace messaging and language that highlights positive steps towards peace do not ‘sell’ as well a more sensational reporting on violent clashes. Compare the column inches devoted to the Rohingya crisis versus the conflict with other twenty or so EAOs. This is a generalisation but one that is considered to be broadly true by the literature. That assumption informs how journalists can be recommended on contributing to peacebuilding efforts.

A paper in the journal of Media and Communication on building peace through journalism and social media finds that there needs to be a way of assigning news value to ‘peace’. It argues that writing ‘can enhance the peacebuilding efforts in societies and communities’ but requires a broadening of ‘journalistic objectivity’ (Aslam, 2016, p.65) in order to move audience’s perceptions towards alternative narratives. That is to say counter-reporting is not just the idea of addressing falsehoods or finding a novel interesting angle to an existing story, but shifting the entire paradigm - ‘peace process as opposed to violent events; truth as opposed to propaganda; people as opposed to the elite and solution as opposed to victory’ (Aslam, 2016, p.71). This affirms the idea that promoting solutions within a familiar theme can alter people’s perception of an issue, and can lead to building the foundations for peaceful and positive messaging. The paper also shows that ‘journalists can also see conflicts in terms of ‘human relationships’ and help people in connecting with each other’ (p. 66), which especially in conflicts on a genocidal scale (the paper cites Rwanda and Nazi Germany – so therefore could be relevant to Myanmar wherein violence against the Rohingya has infamously been described as ‘textbook ethnic cleansing’ (Safi, 2017)). This shift in objectivity, it is argued, can in turn should ensure that the stories can stand to compete with those which seek to sensationalise violence. It could then be surmised that this approach would be helpful in designing positive messaging on social media – that is to say, producing content which can be shared as readily as other more extreme views.

Conflict and peace

Furthermore, the studies of the Myanmar conflicts have sparked a number of recommendations that can inform the structure of affirmative storytelling and the strategic use of social media as a tool to communicate this. The most recent Mercy Corps desk research for Early Warning Early Responses (EWER) to communal
conflicts sought to learn how better to implement initiatives that ‘prevent violence and transform conflict through inclusive and participatory processes’ (Jarvis-Norse, 2017, p. 13). These initiatives have been evolved across many decades of conflict resolution experience around the globe and have developed systematic approaches to indicate where conflict and violence is occurring and then also what can be done as a response.

Under an early warning system, the process begins with understanding of the contextual situation then monitoring of what is occurring before moving to mediation and communication of the appropriate intervention and early response. As noted here, part of the monitoring early warning structure has grown to include hate speech tracking online and particularly on Facebook. ‘Many monitoring organisations do not consider their work as EWER, but they are nonetheless using many of the same mechanisms’ (Jarvis-Norse, 2017, p. 21).

The Mercy Corps report found a handful of projects that could be considered as part of an EWER and that utilise social media. Firstly, it notes that MIDO one of the most active organisations and had some success with the Pan Zagar project. MIDO is also involved in a ‘Community Information Management Project which seeks to address the role of rumours and manipulated information in intercommunal conflicts’ (Jarvis-Norse, 2017, p. 21). This project was aimed at using local groups as a tool to verify both online and offline information and to disseminate positive messages into communities. MIDO also runs hate speech monitoring – more of which will be investigated in the interview with MIDO later. Ultimately the Mercy Corp research finds that whilst there is some work being done to analyse and collect information about hate and peace speech online, there is only one that has attempted to use positive messaging in Myanmar – the Pan Zagar project. Even then, in the context of an early response to intercommunal violence the authors of the research conclude that ‘the verification processes and community responses used by MIDO can represent the beginning of community-based EWER’ (p. 22). That is to say it cannot be considered to be a sophisticated tool, yet.

There are obstacles to using ICT and social media options as early response systems in the areas that Mercy Corps operates. They are cautious to assess the possibility on
a case-by-case basis. Expanding into rural areas can be risky, because despite the huge advances in connectivity (as discussed earlier), the network is not completely reliable and is open to disruption. However successes and experience in EWER from other countries can be replicated in places with good mobile coverage—such as using SMS messaging tools. The Sentinel Project, based in Mandalay, has grown from an intervention in Kenya. The research conducted to inform this project, which has begun looking at the spread of misinformation in Myanmar, found that there were clear divisions along ethnic and religious lines, as expected. Surveys uncovered that respondents were ‘four times more likely to say they did not at all trust information coming from members of other ethnic groups in comparison to their own ethnic group’ (Boyd, 2016). In relation to how information is perceived the same research found that:

‘57.8% of respondents said they had heard a rumour in the past 12 months but only 32% said they had taken action to verify whether or not it was true.’ (Boyd, 2016)

In light of this project, which uses SMS (due to its robustness as a tool), Mercy Corps conclude that there is scope for social media, such as Facebook messenger, to take over as a platform for dissemination, because ‘it already has a vast user base in the country and people already know how to use the platform’ (Jarvis-Norse, 2017, p. 37).
**Theory:**

Whilst the literature review shows that there are some difficulties, the main argument in supporting the notion that social media can be used to build peace is that messaging is theoretically able to influence behaviours and convey a particular meaning.

**Symbolic interaction**

In semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure outlined the process of deriving meaning via signifiers and the signified that creates the illusion of reality. Language is based on this system bridging the gaps in interpretation between one person and another. I would contend that sociologically, in the complex web of social media, the concept of symbolic interactionism is the model through which the semiotic system should be viewed. This is the idea that, each actor – or user - is involved in iterative and constantly evolving participatory processes, contributing to the changing of meaning. Rather ‘inter-action must instead be understood as a dynamic, evolving process of mutual coordination and role taking. Each actor’s conduct cannot be separated from the response of the other’. (Sage Publications, 2009). Signs are particular to a certain social network and those within are bouncing the signifiers and signified around creating incremental changes to the shared meaning through interaction.

George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer hypothesised that symbolic interaction was the foundation of social formations. The idea is that people’s understanding about themselves and each other is built via this process. This is where I think that social media for peacebuilding has a role, by influencing the way that people think about themselves and others through their symbolic interactions on social networks both online and offline.

Mead’s theory that the identification of the self leads to one’s self-labelling as ‘male or female, young or old, rich or poor…as belonging to this or that ethnic group’ (Blumer, 2004), regardless of whether this is true or not. In principle, one might design a campaign in which people are brought to a different understanding of
themselves and other, that hate speech, inciting violence and spreading misinformation are not acceptable, and to engage in positive behaviour.

In Myanmar the process of symbolism being skewed to negatively determined actions is deeply ingrained in society, especially in part due to the history of propaganda towards officially recognised ethnic groups and their status as minorities. However due to the proliferation of smartphones and the uptake in digital communications, I would argue that the tools are available now to disrupt the prevailing process of symbolic interaction towards one that reduces inter-communal violence and increases understanding between groups.

Smaller campaigns to this end would follow more the line of social cognitive theory (SCT) techniques. SCT is rewards orientated, rather than seeking to highlight punishment or reproach for bad behaviour, and ‘can promote the positive outcomes associated with adherence to campaign recommendations’ (Sage Publications, 2009 p. 89). This is the extent of the current thinking for interventions in Myanmar as revealed in the literature review.

Prototype theory

Related to semantic linguistics is the concept that when people categorise they are biased towards certain terms which have slightly differing meanings. Using words with more positive connotations could have an impact on how the overall meaning is constructed. Eleanor Rosch puts this simply as the difference between ‘seat’ and ‘chair’, which may have common attributes but are still different concepts. (Rosch, 1978). Prototypes are building blocks of categories which, like in semiology, provide the structure for meaning, but here prototypes are ‘structural facts about categories from the possible role of prototypes in cognitive processing, representation, and learning.’ (Rosch, 1978). They can be used to build a narrative and elicit a certain response just by altering the types used. As Rosch says, ‘substitution of subordinate terms for basic-level object names’ gives a certain effect – for example satire or snobbery. This role in representation I would argue, could be an important idea in how communication campaigns should be designed to incorporate the understanding of how certain terms are perceived, and whether the reader/audience
is aware of alternate meanings. It is particularly pertinent sensitive situations and conflict because miscommunication can have unintended consequences, and may well be relevant in a country whereby there are even two systems (Zawgyi and Unicode) for writing the majority language, let alone the other minority languages.

This is an area that social media is very efficient, due to the natural brevity of the posts. Some platforms, such as Twitter, have the character constraints which means that substituting prototypes in sentences to alter their meaning is often effective to create humour. Towards peacebuilding, prototype theory could be a way of changing perceptions through the use of alternative blocks of meaning that ultimately have an intended effect of changing the overall narrative. This may be seen in how positive messaging social cognitive campaigns are designed, but need to take into consideration the complexities of dialect and minority languages.
**Research methodology:**

The methodology to be used in the research section of this thesis is based in part on the findings of the literature review and the theoretical concepts. Namely that interventions using social media and positive messaging are viable. As mentioned in the sections above, there are a number of organisations that have been working in Myanmar to monitor hate speech on social media but not many have examined the use of positive messaging on social media in Myanmar, save for a few notable examples.

Therefore, it was chosen to conduct interviews with the key actors and gather input from the experts that are working in this field, cross referenced with examples from desk research into recent interventions organisations. This approach means that the amount of empirical data is rather limited, but from the answers given in the interviews can be analysed to extrapolate to find the extent to which the argument for using social media to build peace in Myanmar can be made.

These included representatives from:

- The Myanmar ICT for Development Organisation (MIDO) – a civil society organisation at the heart of Myanmar’s response to social media use.
- International Media Support (IMS) – NGO supporting journalists and promoting the development of media
- Piyawasa Digital Agency – for-profit start-up conducting branded social media campaigns
- Echo Myanmar - public relations agency engaged in media monitoring as well as social media listening.

For the first two, the interview technique used was face-to-face and long form with open-ended questions. The answers were recorded and later transcribed for the purpose of writing up. It was structured with prepared lines of questioning, but also allowed a back-and-forth discussion of the issues.

The second group were approached via instant messaging – which is apt for this research and has the advantages of being convenient for the interviewee and
Due to the limitations on the number of interviews because of time constraints, a small opinion survey was also conducted to act as key insights into the research and how people in Myanmar understand the notion of peacebuilding through social media, if they agree that positive messaging can have an impact. The survey is a mix of 10 closed and open-ended questions to understand how they perceived hate and positive speech.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Email address *</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your email address</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your answer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Questions**

What social media apps do you regularly use? *
- Instagram
- Messaging services (FB, WhatsApp etc.)
- SnapChat
- Facebook
- Other:

How much do you trust information shared on social media *
- Nothing can be trusted
- I am open minded and judge case by case
- I am mostly critical about what I see
- I mostly trust what my friends are posting

Do you encounter hate speech online *
- Yes
- No

If yes, how often? *
- Every day
- Every week
- Rarely

Have you seen anyone posting positive speech online e.g. Pan Zagar ‘flower speech’ campaign *
- Yes
- No
- Other:

Do you think people in different regions of Myanmar communicate well with each other? *
- Yes
- No
Can positive messaging on social media promote peacebuilding in Myanmar?

The survey was shared with 50 people via a link to an online Google Form, with the majority based in Yangon and were between 18-35. As the questions were asked in English, the responses were therefore coming from an educated, urban elite – which should be taken into consideration as a factor of the resulting findings.

Furthermore, in the week of 23-29 September 2017, a short media monitoring pilot was conducted. The time constraint was imposed to avoid the study becoming too large to process and too many duplicates being included. This was carried out in collaboration with PR Agency Echo Myanmar, wherein news both online and in the press was scanned for articles on hate speech, false news or positive messaging. During 30 days from 27 January to 26 February 2018 a small quantitative monitoring of news relating to Facebook was also collected, the results of which are below.
The aim of the media monitoring qualitative observations and quantitative totals of news is to provide context for the desk research, survey and interview portions.
Results analysis:

MIDO

To shed more light on the work that the Myanmar ICT for Development Organisation have done in the space of social media and positive messaging – as the major actor in this area – an interview was conducted with Myo Min Aung – Communications Officer at MIDO.

The programs MIDO run are aimed at addressing Myanmar’s diversity – this is crucial to reaching those that are most at risk from intercommunal violence. The most recent research project which is underway is in collaboration with the Myanmar Media and Society ‘Peace Memories’. Myo Min Aung explains that ‘different religious groups were studied and we asked them to tell us about moments they have lived with other religious groups together peacefully’ (Aung, 2017). This project attempts to recorded the memories of positive associations with other religious groups to then use as examples to the general public of instances of tolerance and peace. For example, tensions and sensitivities can arise during times of religious observance such as Muslim Ramadan, the Buddhist Thingyan water festival and Christmas. Historically, and currently, there is great suspicion created between Buddhist and Muslim communities, fuelled by certain malicious and well organised nationalist of society – ‘xenophobic [Buddhist] monks consistently accuse Islam and Christianity of having attempted to wipe out Burmese Buddhism’ (Mang, 2016, p. 647), or being under the influence of foreign actors. Most famously Wirathu, a national Buddhist monk who appeared on the cover of TIME in 2012 as the “face of Buddhist terror”, is an active user of Facebook and he is strongly anti-Muslim. He uses social media to great effect to spread his message.

This MIDO project brings communities together and encourages them to participate in their neighbour’s culture in order to build trust, and then to recount their memories of those moments for posterity. In this way MIDO are creating a log book of positive messages that can then be communicated through various channels, and intends that the memories will be presented as a physical book and also via digital storytelling. Using affirmative experiences can in theory counter the spread of hate
speech, undermining the narrative by supplanting with a better understanding of the other's culture and forming a positive relationship with it. This is a tactic in peacebuilding, it’s said that ‘A person’s values and beliefs are the moral framework that inspires his or her life. It is very difficult to generate hatred for another group or for an individual while trying to articulate one’s own deepest values in a moral framework’ (Oxford, Hancock, & Zdanoski, 2012).

Sharing these values online and finding commonality makes them relatable to others, breaking down barriers. Storytelling through animation is also a way of making experiences more accessible. Similarly, the campaign Positive/Negative also uses these techniques to tell stories from around the word, combining ‘ethnographic research with illustration and photography, adapting personal testimonies into art, education and advocacy materials’.

Myo Min Aung admits that things are worse now, in his experience than they were previously. ‘We have the experience of living with different diversity. We used to live with that kind of situation. That’s what we want to give to the public.’ He hopes that through the Peace Memories project, the messaging can convey people have been living together for generations. He says that ‘Myanmar is very diverse’ and the aim is to cover as many ethnic groups as possible, as well as religious groups, not just a focus on Bamar and Muslims.

Historically Myanmar adopted policies that attempted to ‘assimilate’ (Smith, 1994) all the recognised ethnic groups, and during the socialist-inspired era the union was promoted as a utopian vision. An interviewee in a recent article described growing up in the 1960s during Burma’s embracing of socialism as ‘all people were equal together at the bottom’ (Clark, 2017). However, this policy has ‘not merely failed to unify Burma, but also backfired, contributing to the rising nationalism and insurgency of ethnic minority groups, which make national reconciliation even more difficult’ (Mang, 2016). Myo Min Aung says that MIDO is carrying out this research not for the short term, but for the long-term transformation of society to promote tolerance and peace between the different communities.
There were naturally challenges and pushback when conducting this research in the field which held up the process - in some places the participants did not agree that they should be living in peace with their neighbours. People commented that ‘they used to live peacefully with others before, but that now they say it is not possible to live with them anymore’ (Aung, 2017). This sentiment was shared by only a few respondents and one or two people declined to answer.

To inform the dissemination of the positive messages collected by Peace Memories MIDO implemented a project called CIM – Community Information Management – which is a news literacy project. This was aimed at counteracting fake or false news on Facebook. The project took in two specific areas of the country, Lashio and Amarapura, ‘where there was a history of communal conflict and violence’ (Aung, 2017). They organised community activists into trainings on news literacy and then formed Facebook groups and email chains. When the training was completed, the activists were returned their communities so they could mobilise their own local neighbourhoods to systematically verify the news that is evolving and popping up around them.

**Fake news**

One of the largest challenges in Myanmar is the verification of news, both online and in the press. This is due to the fact that people do not trust international media (anymore) and they do generally trust what they see in the media, and are slightly more sceptical about social media. The insight survey gathered for this thesis found that 62% of respondents said they are ‘open minded and judge on a case by case basis’ of posts on Facebook, compared to 38% who were ‘mostly critical’. This mirrors the literature whereby the Sentinel Project found a third of people they researched went on to try and verify a rumour they had heard via another source.
To combat this, there is one successful developer in Myanmar that is attempting to overcome the difficulties in working with the Burmese language and providing a news verification process at the same time. As mentioned previously, the trouble with Burmese script is that it is not readily digitised, and there is a lack of support for the Zawgyi code internationally. Unicode is only just starting to be implemented in a more systematic fashion, and news from Burmese speaking outlets does not get picked up by search engines. Global giants Google are barely registered as an entity in Myanmar.

The start-up that is attempting to fill this void and to capitalise on digital advertising space left by the lack of Google is called Bindez. This company has developed ‘search and NLP (natural language processing) in Burmese’ (Cabera, 2016) via its application Thadin. It allows people in Myanmar to genuinely search online, rather than rely on the poorer functionality of Facebook search. However, the impact of this tech unicorn is yet to be determined, despite the creators claiming that their ‘news aggregation app has reached a million downloads and 2 million page views per month’ (Cosseboom, 2017). Bindez uses the same technology to conduct social media monitoring but to provide insights for international brands. Bindez claims ‘it’s the only social media listening tool specific to the Myanmar market. It’s able to support local language and cultural nuance, with the help of machine learning.’ (Cosseboom, 2017)
Traditional C4D

Pernille Bo Kristensen, from International Media Support an institute that supports journalists and news organisations, found that people in rural areas, even close to the commercial capital Yangon still do not have access to connectivity and have very low ICT skills. This is in spite of, she says, the digital revolution and the huge number of smartphones coming into Myanmar. The approach that IMS are currently taking to serve communities is in setting up a community radio station and conducting an assessment of people’s media needs. ‘Our objective is to connect with the non-Facebook generation and to create quality, public interest content’ (Kristensen, 2017). This follows insight that people are interested in telling the stories of their grandparents (so they don’t get lost after they pass), village histories and even music programmes. Everyone ‘wants to be DJs’ (Kristensen, 2017). One of the major restrictions to social media and a barrier to building intercommunal peace which Facebook cannot currently overcome, unless there is a higher adoption of the Unicode standard, is that people still want to communicate in their local language. Radio is perfect for ‘listening to people’s voices and protecting local languages’, and can be harnessed to tell the stories and narratives which can lead to more effective peace building.

Hate speech

MIDO’s social media monitoring project known as SOS, monitors Myanmar Facebook pages for six indicators of hate speech: threats, accusations, dehumanisations, encouragement of violence, bullying and harassment. The difficulty is that the general public find it very challenging to themselves understand what is hate speech, false and inflammatory. ‘People think that Facebook is an official media and take it for real. These are the kind of scenarios we see’ (Einzenberger, 2016), due to the relatively low digital literacy rates in the country.

In my small survey, close to 70% of respondents said ‘yes’ they have encountered hate speech online, and of those 15% said they saw it every day, 30% every week.
However due to the sample size being relatively small\(^1\), and predominantly well-educated and urban, they will have been more likely to be able to spot the hate speech.

**Media monitoring**

To supplement this survey, in the week of 23-29 September 2017 a short media monitoring pilot was conducted to gauge the news worthiness of hate speech and conflict. It was found that there were a number of stories that related to these subjects, which could be said to back up the generalisation made in the section above about stories about negative messaging tend to gain more traction than others. However the nuance was that international media were critical of the regime, whereas local media chose stories that were angled away from the government.

Reporting by the international media held the Myanmar government to account for its actions, through the kind of anti-false news journalism that would be held up as global standards. For example, there was the news reported by Reuters (and also republished in the local Irrawaddy News – a famous formally exiled media house) that the Tatmadaw was allegedly ‘hiding’ Facebook posts regarding military action, originally posted to the page of the office of the commander-in-chief Min Aung

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\(^1\) Out of the 50 respondents sought – only 30% completed the survey fully.
Hlaing. ‘The posts were hidden for the month of August, however they could still be found when searching using specific date or keyword’. (Reuters, 2017). This shows just how much the Myanmar government is attempting to control the narrative and to obscure posts that might counter their agenda. A number of news sites also reported that a Facebook post by the Myanmar government’s Information Committee to show Rohingya militants had attacked Hindu communities ‘was accompanied by a graphic photo of the mass Hindu grave that was found near the village in Rakhine.’ (BBC News, 2017).

Conversely, local media printed stories during that week that were a little more positively toned. Rather than reporting on how the Government is using its own social media accounts to shape a narrative during a conflict, they chose to cover that an anti-hate speech draft law was submitted to Myanmar Parliament and will be passed to the Union Parliament, ‘where there will be a debate on whether the law will truly prevent hate speech’ (DVB, 2017).

There was also a local editorial piece in the printed press (The Voice) that questioned why a broadcaster had interviewed a Facebook celebrity who has been spreading hate speech, using offensive and inappropriate words, for the purpose of entertainment.

See figure 5, left. Image: The Voice Myanmar

Furthermore, in a period of 30 days from 27 January to 26 February 2018 there were 23 articles (see appendix) in the local press that covered Facebook related news, including 8 articles that were related to legal action being taken under the miss-use of telecommunications act (the famous 66d and 66c), which allows people or the government to sue social media users if they think they
have been spreading false news. This is a particular tactic, increasingly used by the government, to suppress journalism and commentary online.

What this shows is that digital literacy and awareness of how social media can be used for nefarious purposes is covered in the general press in Myanmar – however there were only two articles that could be deemed ‘positive’ messaging. This was an op-ed on Safer Internet Day, which was distributed by Facebook themselves to promote the idea of using their platform in an affirmative way.

**Facebook**

Facebook have taken greater steps to help mitigate the use of their platform as a tool to spread hate, and have engaged in interventions in Myanmar – at times working closely with CSOs to create counter narratives of their own. The Safer Internet Day op-ed is one example, although coming from a global initiative.

There was a journalist and media safety training seminar held by Facebook in Yangon in December 2017, in which the mechanisms for suppressing hate speech were discussed. They have taken action to actively suppress fake news, when flagged and Facebook can stop certain accounts that are identified as spreading hate speech from boosting their posts, and may even take them down. It was advised that journalists and news organisations should use their pages, rather than profiles, because they can control content, comments, ban people and ban certain words from appearing.

In early 2017 Facebook took steps to ‘clamp down on hate speech’ (AFP, 2017), and attempted to remove islamophobic words and phrases in Burmese. This included the term ‘kalar’ which is used as a slur against dark-skinned people, outsiders and Muslims. Unfortunately, this reactive approach can be dangerous and there was a significant backlash to this attempt at over correcting language on the platform. ‘Some users said they were even blocked after writing other words that include the same sound in the Burmese alphabet, highlighting the difficulties Facebook has monitoring millions of posts in multiple languages’ (AFP, 2017).
Myo Min Aung from MIDO recalled this time and when they collaborated with the Facebook Myanmar team as part of a consortium of civil society organisations. ‘We used to give them advice’ he says ‘but I don’t know which organisation had given them the advice to do that [ban kalar] The term is not only used in a negative or racist sense, but it is contained within other words such as “kalar hating” which means chair. We also have “kalar” bae which is a type of bean. So banning that word was not a good idea.’ (Aung, 2017) This criticism relates to the linguistic prototype theory whereby certain words are chosen over others due to their function and categorisation, but in this case the term has been blanket-banned without having the desired affect of removing its negative connotations from the platform.

On the other hand, the proactive promotion of positive messaging was found to be a very good idea. The active social media and media monitoring by MIDO and their partners has fed into a resource for both the Peace Memories project and the Pan Zagar flower speech programme.

Pan Zagar, Myo Min Aung explains, started in 2014 as a counter speech offline campaign. The movement began at the ASEAN People’s Forum being held in Yangon and was simply enacted by holding sign boards, promoting a message saying ‘do not spread hatred’. ‘We faced down one of the nationalist groups that was there. They wanted to stop us, they thought our message was ‘nothing’. But our campaign was gathering a bigger and bigger audience’ (Aung, 2017). The approach to very directly challenge hate speakers so visibly in this way, particularly before the Aung San Su Kyi’s NLD party swept to power under the aspersions of democracy is brave and effective. ‘Many people from the ASEAN People’s Forum came to participate in our campaign – holding banners, taking pictures.’

This approach foreshadows the type of counter narrative and peace building messaging that MIDO would go on to producing. It was so successful, Myo Min Aung said ‘after that the nationalists disbanded, due to our more successful counter protesting. They had planned to have their own demonstration, but ours had a bigger audience and they backed down’. Because so many people were mobilised, the nationalists felt that they could not spread their message of hate. The success of that movement led to the campaign being moved online.
In 2014 when Facebook arrived in Myanmar, it coincided with the mobile phone boom. Then millions of people dramatically came online but people did have news literacy awareness, and hate speech was booming. ‘If you come into the Facebook world in Myanmar, you will find so much hate speech, so we decided to move online’ (Aung, 2017).

The first initiative that was created was inspired by the success they had with the visual tools used at the ASEAN People’s Forum. This was to launch a series of ‘stickers’ which could be used in Facebook messenger. A pack was created that contained positive messages illustrated with cute characters.

**Figure 6**

![Sticker image](image: Pan Zagar)

One of the stickers reads: ‘Let’s be careful with our words, don’t spread hatred.’ The hosting of the sticker pack was done in collaboration with Facebook, who were able to give statistics on the popularity of the positive messaging. In one year, February 2015-2016, they received 2.7 million downloads – and even more impressively the stickers were used 12.9 million times sent in messages.

Unfortunately, there is no further research into the effectiveness or impact of these campaigns into demonstrable peacebuilding. MIDO are looking into setting up some monitoring and evaluation of this initiative to examine whether there has been any behaviour change as well as increased awareness, but it has not yet been produced.
Myo Min Aung asks ‘Can we decide that by means of Facebook likes and comments? We would have been the most successful campaign by that measure, in the world!’

Due to the large number of subscribers, likes and comments the campaign could well be judged as a success. The page itself has over 212k likes (as of September 2017) and the separate posts that had the highest activity and attention received around 15k engagement with up to 300 individual comments.

**Influencing – application of theory**

When asked what kind of tactics MIDO would employ for the next round of positive messaging, Myo Min Aung said that this was not confirmed yet, but was looking into the possibility using social influencers. However, the landscape has changed in the few years since 2014. Back then, people were inspired by actors, directors, artists – but now social influencers are only famous for their posts. ‘They play a very big role recently. So we are thinking of doing another wave using people like this – travel bloggers and so on, people trust what they say’.

Christopher Shickler, Managing Director of the digital agency Pyiwasa thinks that it would indeed be possible to leverage influencers to create a campaign aimed at inclusion and peace, creating a campaign based on social cognitive theory. He believes that it would have to be handled with care, because most of the social influencers in Myanmar are ‘broadly pro-government on the Rakhine issue’. (Shickler, 2018) However, it would be possible with a big enough budget and enough buy in from a critical mass of celebrities to make an impact. ‘It would need to be a big campaign aimed at inclusion and brotherly love. Everyone would need to be involved all at once, but yes we could fix a lot of thing in this country if we had budget’.

Similarly Su Shwe Yee Htun Senior Account Manager at Echo Myanmar was consulted and agrees that social influencers do have a role to play, especially by promoting positive stories online.

She said that content or visuals, such as with the Pan Zagar campaign, created with local language have higher engagement than English content and that ‘the
engagement rate of positive viral stories can go up higher than 12%.’ (Htun, 2018) Furthermore, she asserts that social media can be used to build trust between communities. ‘A brand can use social media to communicate their brand value consistently’ and communities can interact better with each other by having a ‘brand persona or an identity set...its important for community pages to be transparent. Being always the first one to provide facts, credible news, reports would help boost a community's image in the long term.’ (Htun, 2018).

Both Shickler and Htun’s responses are intriguingly use consumer marketing related language, rather than that of international development – as they are speaking from the perspective of the commercial sector. This is somewhat appropriate when speaking about Facebook in Myanmar, because ultimately the platform is not only a social tool for the masses, but a for profit enterprise. It could be argued that whilst Facebook has found itself with a responsibility to mediate, but cannot be expected to fix the country’s conflicts, because it is an advertising company first and foremost.

To highlight this, the opinion survey showed that those asked had little faith in institutions and others to control the narrative online. Over 50% said that they think the general public would be best suited to countering hate speech, in a collective effort.

**Figure 7:**

![Pie chart showing responsible for countering hate speech](chart)

Finally, below are some selected responses to the question of what should be done to build peace in Myanmar through social media action. They represent a range of
views from more filtering and oversight, the involvement of NGOs, affirmative action, and the behaviour of the individual.

**Table 1:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Filter carefully and let only positive content be uploaded.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education en masse, or prevention of false aliases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOs to take control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media users need to check the sources of their news if they are reliable and trustful and to consider the consequences. More importantly, they should not release click bait for the purpose of getting followers, tweets, likes and shares.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just read more information and balance with self-control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educate people on how to use the platforms effectively. More talks and seminars in universities and schools in different regions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote awareness along the lines of importance of diversity and inclusion</td>
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<tr>
<td>It's a cultural mind shift. People need to realise the impact of posting negative messaging. More awareness on positive messaging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punitive action - need to be more aggressive about hate speech.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final two of the responses in the table stand out as being at opposite ends of the SCT campaign ideas. One is to shift perceptions and behaviour based on rewarding language – encouraging positive messaging - and the other is to be more ‘aggressive’ against hate speech. The latter approach is the dominant way of currently tackling people who post messages on social media counter to that which is desired, by for example invoking the harshest sentences under the 66d legislation. However that is seen not to have long lasting effects. What should be being considered is the former – creating the conditions for a change in thinking which will lead to positive outcomes.
Conclusion:

Based on the available literature, the interviews and opinions gathered above (despite the limited reach of the survey), the answer the question as to whether positive messaging can build peace in Myanmar is: yes. However that answer is dependant more comprehensive research into this area - and during the writing of this thesis, a major study into social media and conflict has just begun. However, one can surmise that a targeted campaign on social media (i.e. Facebook in Myanmar) can certainly be an effective tool in promoting alternative narratives, but it requires a cohesive, systematic and most likely well-funded approach by a number of actors.

The current situation is that small actors have been conducting minor campaigns may or may not have had any wide reaching consequences. For example, going forward, a connection could be made between taking small scale campaigns based on social cognitive theory such as the Pan Zagar project, and marry them with a way of disrupting the overall of symbolic interaction process over social media. That field would move towards to more of an identity and personality theory, but would be applied more comprehensively to temper specific conflict areas.

As Shickler suggests, using a large-scale influential campaign that is coordinated and targeted, a concerted effort to alter people’s own thinking about themselves and others could be made. The ‘core concept of identity theory understood as internalization of role expectations attached to positions in social networks’ (Stryker, 2008). Leveraging those networks to change the perception of identity would lead to roles being updated. By doing so, traditional barriers and engrained perceptions of race, ethnicities and language can be either removed or lowered in a manner that promotes positivity across the divides, rather than reinforcing them. In my view, social media has long been criticized for creating an alternative version of oneself through interactions online, therefore this large-scale campaign would use those impulses to implement a different notion of those identities but which exclude hateful or false elements.

I propose that in order to achieve this, the campaign should take into account the ideas of cognitive accessibility (Hunsberger, 2018) – that is to say people are more
susceptible to certain types of messages if they have already been primed. The ubiquitous nature of social media means that it is perfect for targeted situational accessibility, that is: factors in the environment that activates a certain construct. In this case peaceful constructs vs violent constructs - the more exposed people are to one or the other means that they are cognitively more attuned to that idea. It would have to be built in order to reach those who can have the biggest impact on the chosen ethnic or communal conflict – perhaps, controversially, even through segmented advertising in the manner that political campaigns have been exploited in recent years (tactics of which are being only now exposed in the Cambridge Analyitca scandal). It would, instead of upending a political system, reverse the trend of hate speech and misinformation in Myanmar towards that of peace.
Bibliography

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Can positive messaging on social media promote peacebuilding in Myanmar?

Can positive messaging on social media promote peacebuilding in Myanmar?


Appendix:

Results of media monitoring 27 Jan - 26 Feb 2018

Table 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headline</th>
<th>Publication</th>
<th>Publishing Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Astrologer Aung Chit Po sued Phyo Wai Win account under Telecommunication Law</td>
<td>The Voice</td>
<td>28/01/2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U Wi Ra Thu streamed live and announced that both of his account has been banned by Facebook</td>
<td>7Day Daily</td>
<td>28/01/2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hackers stole above 172 billion dollars from online users</td>
<td>Myanmar B2B Management Magazine</td>
<td>29/01/2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By using recovery option can't be assume as a hacker</td>
<td>The Voice</td>
<td>30/01/2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spreading that Government is destroying the monastery on social media is just a fake news.</td>
<td>Myanmar News Week</td>
<td>01/02/2018</td>
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<td>Facebook to give scholarships to journalism students</td>
<td>Duwun</td>
<td>01/02/2018</td>
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<td>Bus tickets for local road trips can be bought easily from online</td>
<td>Internet Journal (Website)</td>
<td>02/02/2018</td>
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<td>The users will be sued for faking comments and quotes which are not likely said by U Win Htain</td>
<td>Daily Eleven</td>
<td>03/02/2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>This is the best time for youths to learn the Cyber Security</td>
<td>Myanmar Alin</td>
<td>03/02/2018</td>
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<td>Facebook account owner who distributed Erke sport wears and goods has been sued with Section 66(c)</td>
<td>Myanmar Times Daily</td>
<td>06/02/2018</td>
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<td>Safer Internet Day</td>
<td>Myanmar Updated News</td>
<td>06/02/2018</td>
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<td>People should complaint the social media conflicts with complete information to the specific police department through the townships</td>
<td>24/7 News</td>
<td>07/02/2018</td>
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<td>Finical enterprises and unlicensed software’s dangers</td>
<td>Myanmar Updated News</td>
<td>07/02/2018</td>
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<td>Internet and social media using rate is getting increased in Myanmar</td>
<td>Pyi Myanmar (Black and White)</td>
<td>08/02/2018</td>
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<td>Facebook starts testing downvote button</td>
<td>Internet Journal (Website)</td>
<td>09/02/2018</td>
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<td>Legal Action to be Taken Against Nationalist Supporters at U Ko Ni Trial</td>
<td>The Irrawaddi</td>
<td>09/02/2018</td>
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<td>Topic</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Date</td>
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<td>Shwe Eain Si is willing to know the reason of suing her under Section 66 (d)</td>
<td>Cele Yat Kwat</td>
<td>10/02/2018</td>
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<td>Prosecution offers to drop charges against Swe Win if he Apologises to U Wirathu</td>
<td>The Irrawaddy</td>
<td>13/02/2018</td>
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<td>Myanmar Now, Chief Editor, U Swe Win told he has no plan to apologize U Wi Ra Thu</td>
<td>Duwun</td>
<td>14/02/2018</td>
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<td>Online Directories for Parents</td>
<td>Myanmar Times Weekly (MM)</td>
<td>15/02/2018</td>
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<td>Singer Kyar Pauk uses Facebook just for entertainment work</td>
<td>The Voice</td>
<td>15/02/2018</td>
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<td>Using Facebook can ruin mental illness?</td>
<td>Chunn</td>
<td>22/02/2018</td>
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<td>Nyi Nyi Maung (San Chaung) is happy to upload the video files on Facebook</td>
<td>8 Day</td>
<td>23/02/2018</td>
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