

Normalizing Harm: Cyber-Scam Economies and Moral Reasoning in Myanmar's Borderlands

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Abstract

The paper examines how cyber-scam industries in Myanmar's borderlands have become locally tolerated and normalized, even as they defraud thousands of victims abroad and generate billions of dollars in illicit revenues. Focusing on cyber-scam cases in Shan and Kayin States, it argues that scam hubs should be understood not only as transnational criminal enterprises but also as locally embedded political economies operating in zones of fragmented sovereignty.

While foreign governments and international media frame these sites as organized crime and human trafficking complexes, many local authorities, armed actors, and communities treat them as sources of employment, rents, and infrastructure. Under these conditions, harm is perceived as distant and external: profits and local order are internalized, while victims are imagined as anonymous outsiders. The paper asks how such moral normalization becomes possible, and why these digitalized illicit economies expanded to a scale that alarms regional and global powers.

Methodologically, the study combines semi-structured interviews with analysis of media coverage, policy reports, and documentary sources, using a comparative process-tracing approach across multiple borderland sites. It shows how normalization emerges from the interaction of economic precarity, fragmented state control, protection by armed actors, and the asymmetry between local beneficiaries and distant victims, allowing harmful fraud to be reframed as ordinary business and livelihood.

Theoretically, the paper brings borderland political economy into dialogue with moral philosophy. Drawing on Nietzsche's account of historically contingent moral valuations and Hannah Arendt's insights into the routinization and "banality" of harmful practices, it argues that cyber-scam industries persist not simply because of greed or coercion, but because wrongdoing becomes morally reclassified and routinized within unstable systems of governance. The paper thus advances a moral sociology of illicit economies in Myanmar studies and contributes to broader debates on responsibility in a digitally interconnected yet politically fragmented world.