



From Traditional Roots to Digital Wings: The Evolution of Connectivity in Mizo Society

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Abstract

Mizo society is experiencing a transformation as it transitions from historically rooted communal structures to a digital framework. This evolution has changed the methods of interaction, moving from physical, face-to-face communication to mediated digital environments. Historically, public information was managed by the Tlangau—a village crier whose role served as the primary node for broadcasting public decrees and community warnings. Other established channels for interaction included spontaneous interpersonal interaction, cooperative working, communal labour, voluntary group social work (hnatlang), and the custom of evening courting (nula rim), all of which functioned through physical presence and localized contact. Emergence of information technology has caused a generational gap in accessing information in Mizo society as the older generation often faces digital exclusion in the 21st century.

This Grey Digital Divide refers to the gap or differences in ICT skills, hardware or software access, and information literacy among the elderly. This research article examines the technical and psychological barriers encountered by Mizo elders attempting to navigate 21st-century information networks. The paper argues that the evolution of connectivity should not necessitate a total replacement of tradition, but rather an improvement and development that enhance communication in the society. By grounding "digital wings" in the "traditional roots" of the Mizo community, the society

can foster an inclusive digital environment that ensures elders remain connected to the information age without losing their cultural anchor.

Introduction

The historical evolution of Mizo society is deeply anchored in a system of physical solidarity and oral communication. For generations, information was not a personal commodity but a communal event, disseminated through ritualized channels like the Tlangau (village crier) and reinforced through cooperative labour practices such as hnatlang, inlawm, inpuih, among others. This traditional connectivity relied on physical presence and aural respect, exemplified by the crier's ritual call—"Khai! Khai! Hear my voice!"—which acted as a social trigger for silence and ensured information reached every household landmark. However, as global digital transformation reshapes social structures, Mizo society is navigating a transition from these "Traditional Roots" to modern "Digital Wings," a shift that has introduced a profound Grey Digital Divide (Ashraf & Johnson, 2026; Mubarak & Suomi, 2022).



The digital history of Mizoram began in the late 1990s, with general public access emerging in the early 2000s (Chhanchhuahi & Deka, 2023). While this has enhanced professional and daily life for many, it has also created a "digital left behind" group among the elderly, who struggle with the tangible availability of technology and the skills required to navigate it (Chhanchhuahi & Deka, 2023). Qualitative data from the current study's focus group discussions identifies a 84% exclusion rate among Mizo elders in digital spaces. This divide is not merely technical but is driven by significant psychological and linguistic barriers. Because smartphone interfaces are primarily in English, many elders find themselves "stumbled and stuck," a frustration compounded by "digital anxiety" or the fear of damaging the hardware (Ashraf & Johnson, 2026; Weck & Afanassieva, 2022).

This transition is particularly evident in the mode or medium of spreading of essential community news, such as obituary (death news), social events, family events, wedding announcements or invitations, religious events. Earlier these were circulated orally or with public address system or newspaper, but now it is mostly circulated online such as WhatsApp groups. As the majority of Mizo elders cannot access these digital spaces independently without support of others, they are increasingly isolated from the community's heartbeat. The study identifies decline of deep or intimate interpersonal communication, such as the informal inquiries about personal matters, as it is mostly now casual, surface-level digital greetings that lack the moral and social depth of traditional oral interaction.

This research aims to analyse these barriers and propose a framework for "Digital Symbiosis." By capturing the experiences of people aged 50–80, the study seeks intergenerational pathways where the technical fluency of the youth provides the necessary "scaffolding" for elders to remain connected to the modern community. (Chen et al., 2025; Pacific & Satchanawakul, 2025). Through this exploration, the paper argues that the future of Mizo connectivity must remain grounded in the tribal value of mutual support in information, transforming technology into one of the tools for sustainable society. (Chen et al., 2025; Pacific & Satchanawakul, 2025).

Literature Review

The evolution of connectivity in Mizo society highlights a shift from a centralised, oral communication framework to a decentralised digital environment. This literature review examines the transition of indigenous communication systems, the emergence of the "Grey Digital Divide," and the cultural strategies for bridging generational gaps.

1. Indigenous and tribal communities relied on traditional systems to disseminate information and maintain social order, including Mizo society. The Tlangau (village crier) in Mizo society acted as a vital node for propagating information and inculcating moral values within the rural population. In Mizo society, social bonds are developed through connectivity including interpersonal communication, communal activities, festivals, traditions, and rituals.

2. As society is moving towards digitalization, the elderly people often face "digital exclusion," a phenomenon formally known as the Grey Digital Divide (Mubarak & Suomi, 2022). This divide is not just a lack of access to basic digital facilities, but a widening gap in the skills required to navigate or access the tools. (Mubarak & Suomi, 2022). Research indicates that younger "digital natives" gain global connectivity, but senior citizens in indigenous and tribal areas face barriers, including:

a) Technical Barriers: They have limited access to smartphones or gadgets, and the absence of, or limited, digital content in their native languages (Bao, 2026; Bipasha et al., 2025).

b) Psychological and Cognitive Barriers: There is a high level of "digital anxiety," i.e. a lack of digital awareness, and age-related limitations that hinder access to new technological functions. (Mohan et al., 2024).

Studies in developing countries including India show that digital exclusion rates is high among the elderly (reaching up to 91% in some cohorts), particularly in rural areas.



Research Methodology

To examine the transition from "Traditional Roots" to "Digital Wings," this study utilises a qualitative methodology. This approach is chosen for its ability to capture the level of human experience, "digital anxiety," and the cultural nuances of Mizo connectivity (Bipasha et al., 2025; Mohan et al., 2024).

Data Collection Tools

Semi-Structured Interviews: The researcher used interview with open-ended questions in this study. This allowed participants, particularly elders of above 55 years of age to express the technical challenges they face and their perceptions of modern connectivity in their own words.

Focus Group Discussions: FGDs were utilised to record their shared perspectives on the decline of open interpersonal communication, and the role of certain traditional public information, namely Tlangau in a digitized society. In a group environment, the researcher observed how participants collectively reflected on the decline of physical interaction or neighbourhood communication in the earlier days.

Planning and Sampling

The study involved four focus groups with a total of 32 participants (8 per group) from various neighborhood communities. The cohort size was restricted to facilitate the sharing of individual experience and the attainment of "data saturation," thereby preventing the potential overwhelming of the discussion. Participants were aged between 50 and 80 years, representing the cohort that has lived through the transition from oral village administration to the current information age. Each group was set in a familiar community context to discuss Mizo history, interpersonal communication, and social activities as forms of connectivity.

Research findings and Analysis

1. Traditional Mizo Connectivity and Communal Solidarity

1.1. The Mechanics of Traditional Orality: The Tlangau System: The research suggests that traditional Mizo connectivity was a ritualized, high-integrity oral system which may have prioritized communal synchronization.

1.2. The Landmark Distribution Model: Participants described the Tlangau (village crier) as a mobile information node. Rather than a single broadcast, the crier moved between specific village "landmarks," each covering a radius of approximately 10 houses. This physical proximity ensured that news was not just heard but felt as a communal event.

1.3. Aural Authority and Silence: The crier's ritual call—"Khai! Khai! Hear my voice!"—appears to have functioned as a social trigger for the imposition of absolute silence. One participant noted: "We used to stop whatever we were doing... and even stopped all the things or other persons to stop making any sound." This "soothing voice" and the collective pause in activity provided a level of information integrity that modern digital alerts lack.

1.4. Integrity of the Source: In contrast to digital news, which may be subject to misinterpretation, participants suggested that traditional oral systems appeared "easy" and "direct." The centralization of such interactions may have facilitated the mitigation of information distortion. One notable response highlighted that this system also included moral instruction: "Appointed leaders used to gather the youngers and taught about social codes... that



was very good for social order.” This reinforces research suggesting that indigenous systems are vital for maintaining rural social cohesion.

2. Communal Responsibility and Information Security

2.1. Household Representation: Every household was required to have a representative at community meetings. If a representative was missing due to illness, the "neighbourhood backup" system took over: “We used to ask the neighbour what happened in the community meetings.”

2.2. Solidarity in Spreading Information: The physical solidarity of Mizo society ensured no one was left out. Participants recalled that if someone was not at home, they would be searched for at a neighbour's house or even in the jhoom (forest farming) to ensure they received vital community information, particularly Zualko (death news).

2.3. Moral and Social Order: Connectivity served as a tool for regulation. Leaders used gatherings to teach youth and children about "social codes, moral, and good conduct." This interpersonal communication was the primary method for maintaining social order and preventing misconduct.

2.4. Neighbourhood Visiting and Evening Courting (Nula Rim) as a News Hub: Rituals like neighbourhood conversation and evening courting (nula rim) served as an information exchange space. In nula rim, young men would gather in a girl's house not just for courting but for socializing and to discuss agricultural schedules and village news. Contrary to being purely romantic, the practice of courting lady (nula rim) served as a vital interpersonal communication channel. A participant explained that young men might gather at a girl's house, where the primary topics were news, agricultural schedules, and community events: “The most topics was about—how we spent the day, what jobs... what news are there in the village.” This "connectivity" through physical presence acted as a safety net that digital platforms have yet to replicate.

2.5. Physical Solidarity in Cooperative Labouring and Communal Voluntary Social Work (Hnatlang): Information flow was facilitated by cooperation in agrarian activities like hunting. The communication during these tasks allowed villagers to "arrange themselves" for upcoming community work. This form of connectivity through physical presence ensured that even in the forest, people were informed of important matters.

3. The Shift from Deep Community Bonds to Surface-Level Interaction

3.1. Neighborhood Solidarity: From Deep Inquiry to Casual Greeting: The study suggests that a profound shift in the depth of interpersonal communication within Mizo neighborhoods may have occurred as the implementation of technology reduced the frequency of physical visits.

3.2. The Depth of Inquiry: In the older society, spontaneous interaction was characterized by deep personal inquiries (“Where are you up to?”, “What about your today work?”). These were the primary sources for monitoring the well-being of the community.

3.3. Surface-Level Digitalization: Participants observe that interactions these days have become "casual." Many elders shared that they now "just greet only" without asking for personal details. This "thinning" of social bonds is perceived as a detachment from the traditional Mizo value of neighbourhood solidarity



3.4. The Shift from Deep to Casual Interaction: A significant finding is the perceived "thinning" of social bonds. Traditional connectivity involved deep personal inquiries ("How about your today work?"), whereas digital-era interaction is seen as "casual." Participants noted: "In the present society... we just greet only, and we don't ask personal questions... like when we were young."

4. The Grey Digital Divide: Technological Barriers for Elders

4.1. The Grey Digital Divide: Barriers to "Digital Wings": The research quantifies a 84% digital exclusion rate among the study's elderly demographic, highlighting several key obstacles. The data clearly identifies the transition to digital connectivity as a source of "digital exclusion" for the older generation.

4.1. Technical and Cognitive Barriers: While technology has "eased the way" through WhatsApp and instant calls, it has created a literacy gap. One participant admitted to having a feature phone but stated: "Apart from contacts, I don't know how to access other features." This mirrors global findings where digital exclusion among the elderly can be as high as 91% in specific contexts.

4.2. The Linguistic and Interface Barrier: Because smartphone menus and app content are predominantly in English, Mizo elders find themselves "stumbled and stuck." One participant shared: "Without guidance, I stumbled... as I don't know which to click." This linguistic gap significantly contributes to the "detachment" felt by senior citizens (Bipasha et al., 2025; Chhanchhuahi & Deka, 2023).

4.3. Hardware or Software Difficulty and "Digital Anxiety": Participants reported a profound fear of damaging the hardware or software. "I am afraid I will crush the phone, so I don't dare to touch the phone by myself," one elder noted. This lack of initial trust and the difficulty of typing on small screens act as major deterrents to digital adoption.

4.4. The WhatsApp Paradox: Essential community news—specifically Zualko (death news), anniversaries, wedding invitations, social events, or any public announcements—has migrated almost entirely to social media platforms, such as WhatsApp. Because the majority of elders cannot access these digital spaces independently, they are isolated from the community's heartbeat, often learning of vital news only when others tell them what was discussed online.

4.5. Instant Ease vs. Technical Exclusion: While technology such as WhatsApp has facilitated instantaneous communication, it may create a barrier for those without Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills. One participant observed that while the "advent of technology eases the way," it may present a significant technical impediment if younger people do not assist the elders in navigating these networks.

4.6. The Grey Digital Divide and Intergenerational Dependence.

The transition to "Digital Wings" has introduced significant technical and psychological challenges for Mizo elders.

4.7. Feature Phone Limitations: Many elders are restricted to basic hardware. One participant noted: "I have a feature phone... apart from contacts, I don't know how to access other features." This mirrors research showing that digital exclusion can reach rates as high as 91% when support structures are absent (Mohan et al., 2024; Tomczyk et al., 2023).



5. Cultural Friction, Intergenerational Dynamics, and Future Symbiosis

5.1. Cultural Friction and Intergenerational Dynamics: The study highlights a potential intergenerational dissonance concerning digital decorum and adherence to the Mizo code of communication. In Mizo society, it is customary that communication should be respectful and humble, particularly when interacting with an elder.

5.2. Societal impact: Decline of Cordial and Respectful Conversation: The study suggests a significant friction between "Digital Wings" and "Traditional Roots," particularly regarding the maintenance of social decorum and established hierarchy.

Elders from various groups have expressed concerns regarding the perceived transition from traditional oral communication to the aggressive digital vernacular adopted by younger cohorts. The anonymity of "Digital Wings" may be interpreted as a threat to the Mizo traditional respect for seniors, as younger generations appear to "openly argue" with them in digital spaces.

5.3. Intergenerational Conflict: The "Digital Wings" of the youth may be perceived by elders as a contributor to behavioural inertia and superficiality of expression. Elders have suggested that the younger generation appears to "openly argue" with them, a behaviour that may contradict traditional norms of respecting seniors.

5.4. Knowledge Depth: There is a perception among elders that digital connectivity may promote a superficiality of knowledge. While the youth maintain constant engagement with mobile interfaces, elders suggest this reliance on truncated information, such as short-form updates, may impede the acquisition of profound comprehension.

5.5. The Persistence of the Oral Root: Participants suggested that while technology should be utilized, it should not "compromise our traditional customs." The study concludes that "talking more physically" may be essential for the maintenance of social bonds that digital media cannot adequately replicate. Despite these challenges, participants viewed technology as an "improvement of connectivity" if properly managed.

5.6. Toward a "Digital Symbiosis" - Intergenerational Scaffolding: Most elders rely on family members such as "grandchildren" to access basic functions like YouTube or WhatsApp. This dependency suggests a model of "Digital Symbiosis," where the youth provide the "wings" (technical access) while the elders maintain the "roots" (cultural values and cordial speech) (Chen et al., 2025; Pacific & Satchanawakul, 2025). This confirms that the current state of Mizo connectivity is one of "intergenerational dependence," where the youth act as the primary bridge to the information age (Chen et al., 2025; Stamps & Jones-Williams, 2024).

5.7. Preference for Physical Presence: Due to "digital anxiety," many elders still prefer physical visits to inform others of important matters. This suggests that for the older generation, digital tools have not yet replaced the "Traditional Roots" of physical proximity and oral interaction.



Discussion

Methodology and Qualitative Baseline:

To explore the "Traditional Roots" to "Digital Wings," this study utilised a qualitative methodology that engaged four focus groups, comprising a total of 32 participants aged between 50 and 80 years. The size of each group was limited to eight participants. The methodology facilitated an environment conducive to reaching data saturation, in order to ensure that individual experiences could be shared.

This neighbourhood-based approach provided a qualitative baseline, allowing elders to reflect on the shift in connectivity from oral village administration to the 21st-century digital landscape. Participants recalled the connectivity in earlier society they experienced, characterized by intentional, face-to-face monitoring of community well-being. This analysis confirmed the reality of the "Grey Digital Divide," as 84% digital exclusion rate was found among the study's elderly demographic.

From Ritual to Transmission:

The transition from public information carried by the Tlangau (village crier) to digital communication through social media represents a shift from a "ritual view of communication" to a "transmission view" (Pea, 1994; Sen, 2016). The Tlangau system functioned as a social ritual where the command, "Khai! Khai! Hear my voice!", acted as a trigger for attention or silence and collective synchronization. This physical, communal pause ensured that information was a shared event that reinforced rural social relationship.

Historically, the Tlangau (cryer) operated on certain landmarks that covered a radius of approximately 10 houses and cover the whole village. In contrast, modern digital connectivity is primarily transactional and lacks the "soothing voice" and moral authority of the traditional crier. By reducing communication to truncated, screen-mediated text, society is witnessing a decline in the ritualized space once occupied by communal hubs like Nula Rim (evening courting), cooperative labour, casual neighbourhood talk or visits. In these traditional spaces, "Deep Inquiry" served as the primary mechanism for monitoring community well-being, now supplanted by "Surface-Level Interaction" where digital greetings are perceived as detached (Szécsi, 2021).

Certain Barriers and Social Media:

The 84% digital exclusion rate identifies a gap exacerbated by technical, linguistic, and psychological barriers.

Linguistic Barriers: Smartphone operating systems and core applications are predominantly in English, leaving many elders "stumbled and stuck" without localized interfaces.

Hardware or Software Anxiety: A pervasive fear of "damaging" or crushing devices which they find expensive acts as a significant deterrent to independent adoption (Hill et al., 2015; Weck & Afanassieva, 2022).

Socio-Cultural Friction and the Productivity Paradox:

The change of physical or oral interaction to digital connectivity has led to socio-cultural friction. Elders perceived modern communication system as "laziness" or "non-productivity" due to younger generation's constant mobile engagement.

Furthermore, there is significant dissonance regarding digital decorum. While traditional communication was predicated on aural respect and clear hierarchies, the anonymity of digital spaces allows younger generations to "openly argue" with seniors.



Toward "Digital Symbiosis" and "Intergenerational Scaffolding"

Despite high exclusion rates, Mizo society reveals a model of Digital Symbiosis or Intergenerational Scaffolding. Most elders rely on grandchildren or family members to provide the technical "wings" (accessing YouTube or reading WhatsApp messages) while the elders maintain the "roots" of cultural values. Those who do not have an access to social media due to certain barriers are later informed about the current affairs by other family members or neighbours.

Conclusion

The evolution of connectivity from "Traditional Roots" to "Digital Wings" reflects cultural and technological transition in Mizo society. This research has demonstrated that while the shift to digital platforms offers instant accessibility, it has simultaneously introduced a significant 84% exclusion rate among the Mizo elderly. This "grey digital divide" is not merely a matter of technical access but is deeply rooted in linguistic barriers and a psychological detachment from the mediated nature of modern communication.

The study's findings highlight that traditional Mizo systems—such as the Tlangau, neighbourhood conversation, voluntary social work (hnatlang), and courting (nula rim)—functioned as high-integrity social nodes that prioritized physical presence and oral reliability. The ritualized silence following the Tlangau (village crier)'s call, "Khai! Khai! Hear my voice!", ensured communal synchronization and prevented the information distortion often found in today's rapid digital exchanges. The migration of essential community news, such as obituary alerts, social events, family events like weddings, anniversaries, and birthday celebrations, almost confined to private WhatsApp groups has effectively "de-platformed" a large segment of the elderly population who lack the technical literacy and technical confidence to navigate smartphone interfaces.

However, the unique resilience of Mizo society lies in its social relationship and strong family bonds. Unlike many global contexts where the elderly are increasingly isolated by technology (Mubarak & Suomi, 2022), this research reveals a persistent model of "intergenerational scaffolding". By relying on family members such as children or grandchildren for technical navigation, Mizo elders are maintaining a foothold in the digital age through a hybrid system of "Digital Symbiosis". The high literacy rate of Mizoram state and the informal neighbourhood visit act as powerful mitigants, ensuring that digital information is somewhat still in align the oral traditional loop.

In the 21st-century, connectivity in Mizo community must move not be confined between "roots" and "wings,". To prevent digital detachment, it is essential to foster intergenerational pathways through which the youth or younger generations support the elderly in navigating modern communication systems or informing necessary information. By grounding modern technology in the tribal values of mutual help and social cohesion, Mizo values will remain sustainable despite the existing grey digital divide (Chhanchhuahi & Deka, 2023). This integration ensures that the community's cultural integrity endures, ultimately minimizing the gap between the youth and the elderly as society progresses beyond its current transitional period.

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