

ABSTRACT

Internet studies in Northeast India is in its nascent stage even though the internet marked its existence in the region during the 1990s. The National Informatics Centre (NIC), a Government of India enterprise under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology played a very crucial role in setting up the internet in all the eight northeastern states. NIC Mizoram Centre, set up in 1989 brought internet to the state by the year 1991 which was earlier limited to only a few government offices. This study traces the origin and development of internet in the state of Mizoram while observing the changes it brought to the life of the people in both positive and negative ways. Study on internet nowadays cannot be confined only to the number of connections and the average speed per se but its pervasive nature has called for a more comprehensive study. Studying the growth of internet also encompass a lot of other aspects which may not be possible for a single person to cover at once. Due to geographical disadvantages, Mizoram has its own share of limitations when it comes to internet growth. The hilly terrain being the major obstacle and the construction of roads as well as the unplanned diggings sometimes add problems to the smooth functioning of internet in Mizoram besides unpreventable natural disasters. The government sector cannot merely compete and progress with the pace of the private companies as their development procedure is much more complicated and longer due to the standardized bureaucratic system. There is a great need to document to the commencement and development of the internet in the state and this study tries to do that.

Being in a close knit society, Mizos are quick to adapt new trends and practices. This collectivist nature of Mizo society aids in the escalating spread of new norm from time to time. On the other hand, it also instil a sense of antipathy towards “being different” or “standing out” as their tradition inclined to taking the path that has more footprints, i.e, following the majority. Since the coming of the internet has brought along certain craze and infatuation among its users, Mizo internet users pass on certain trends to one another in no time. The availability of commercial internet has boosted the growth of internet in Mizoram. Easy access, convenience and affordability bring the internet to wider users. In Mizoram, one of the smallest states in India, there are more mobile internet connections than inhabitants. What has been adopted by the majority in certain areas often becomes a part and parcel of peoples’ life in the long run, therefore, this study also examines the change that the internet brought in Mizo society as it is widely used by the people with a decade or two of its existence.

Using a mixed-methods approach, this study examines the level of internet dependency in Mizoram and looks at the ethical internet use pattern among Mizo internet users. Survey questionnaires (online and offline) and semi-structured interviews were employed. The sample size of this study is 600. The respondents comprise of digital natives and digital immigrants selected from three districts which have high population and mobile internet connection using Purposive Sampling technique. The universe of this study comprises of Aizawl, Lunglei and Champhai districts which are the top most populated districts in Mizoram. The reason for choosing these regions is that the population of Aizawl is 400,309, Lunglei – 161,428, Champhai – 125,745 and their total is 687,482, which comprises of 62 % of 10,97,206 Mizoram total population according to Directorate of Economics and Statistics (2011) and also the mobile internet connection in these three districts constitute 72% of the total mobile internet connection in the entire state. Aizawl has 729,524 connections, Lunglei – 232,422, Champhai – 109,244 and total connections in these three regions become 1,071,190 out of the total number of Mobile Connections in Mizoram, i.e. 1,483,213 (ibid, 100). Online and offline version of Internet Dependency Scale (questionnaire) were distributed to the residents of Aizawl, Lunglei and Champhai districts, 200 in each district.

A 5-point Likert scale is used to create the Diurnal Internet Dependency Scale (DIDS), whose internal consistency is 0.835 according to Cronbach's Alpha Reliability. The sample size of this study is 600. The respondents comprise of digital natives and digital immigrants selected from three districts which have high population and mobile internet connection using Purposive Sampling technique. A minimum score of 30 and a maximum score of 150 are used by the respondents to assess their own internet dependency. Theories and concepts like Media Dependency Theory, Media as an Extension of Self, and Technological Determinism vs. Social Determinism support the DIDS scale. The 30 options on this scale are further classified into six categories: Practice, Enhancement, Familiarity, Socialization, Constraints, and Dependency. After determining that the data is normally distributed ($p = 0.071$) using the Shapiro-Wilk test, an ANOVA test was performed to see whether there are any differences amongst these six groups, and the difference between the scores of the digital immigrants and digital natives was also measured using a *t*-test. Media Dependency Theory laid the foundation of this study with significant support from Social Learning Theory, Diffusion of Innovation Theory, Convergence Culture and Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT/UTAUT2).

Focus Group Discussions (FGD) are conducted with three groups of digital natives and another three digital immigrants – six in total. From each of the selected districts, two groups are purposely selected for FGD, one group consisting of digital natives and one group of digital immigrants. The same procedure is followed in the other two districts accordingly. So, there are six FGDs in total – three groups of digital natives and three groups of digital immigrants. The participants are also asked to do self-evaluation or categorization on their stage(s) of adoption regarding the internet as in Diffusion of Innovation Theory.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the local level leaders such as Village Council Office bearers of the three districts and non-government organizations (NGO) leaders at their headquarters offices in Aizawl. Concerned department or offices relevant to this study such as Telecommunication Department, ICT Department, Tribal Research Institute and the Cyber Forensic Consultant of the Mizoram's Government Cyber Crime Department were visited where representatives were interviewed. Apart from these, government non-government (private) Internet Service Providers and Software Developers were also interviewed in order to write the history of internet in Mizoram.

This study shows that most of the internet users have developed a dependency on it as the internet has become an integral part of their life after two decades of its existence. The opinions shared by the participants depicted that Mizo culture is very flexible, that it is easily swayed by the dominating practices including internet practice. When asked to complete a sentence “If the internet is suddenly (or completely) wiped out after decades of its existence...” most of the participants responded that their world will become very chaotic and problematic. They find it difficult to comprehend how the world would become, without the internet. The digital immigrants of Mizoram also noted that internet has significantly brought changes to Mizo culture and society which they believe will be more discernible in the future with continual use. Christianity which becomes a part of Mizo identity for about a century has undergone changes as the dominant worldview has become more ambiguous due to excessive debate and numerous arguments available on social media.

Many of the participants believe that technology is dominating human as people are wooed by its power while there are some who also believe that technology is not above human and is controlled by human society. Majority opinion revolved around the opinion that technology is invented by human but misuse of it can lead to lack of control towards its use and its control

towards us. The participants give examples like alcohol and drugs which are not something dangerous without human consumption but it is human consumption, not only consumption but out of hand or unrestrained consumption that make them malignant. Likewise internet, if use in a moderate and judicious manner, can be a very useful tool but it is the users lack of control (or ignorance) that makes it a destructive entity.

Mizo digital immigrants believed that there is little difference in their communication behaviour before and after the internet exists, but it brings more changes among the digital natives as Social Learning Theory argued that behaviour can be learned through observation. New behaviour is not believed to be acquired consciously from the internet by the immigrants, but they also admit that they might do so, subconsciously. Further, they believed that the internet has broaden their outlook, making them become more open, affectionate and considerate after having better exposure to how people are communicating on the other part of the globe.

The most common problem faced by the respondents due to internet engagement is time management issue – including procrastination, laziness, being unproductive, lack of self control and failure to fulfil one’s responsibility/task, more than 30% of the respondents mentioned this issue. Another prominent problem is related to health, many of the respondents noted that they have eye problem, headache, sleep deprivation, short-temperedness, mood swing, attention/retention and concentration including mental health issue. The internet also cause problem in family relationship as it decreases physical interaction among family members, this communication gap at home weaken the family bond and that also brings difficulty in offline friendship building.

This research looks at the nature of internet dependency and how convergence culture influence Mizo internet users. There is undoubtedly a great dependency on the internet among Mizo internet users as 27% of the respondents are highly dependent while 73% are moderately dependent. Observations of the reactions and feedback of the respondents also showed that since the Diurnal Internet Dependency Scale (DIDS) is used for self-evaluation, they seem to restrict themselves from scoring too high for the sake of modesty. The finding could be different if the same scale is used to evaluate others. The most commonly shared opinion about internet and people is the understanding of reality. All the participants mentioned about the alteration of reality (or understanding of reality rather) by the internet’s presence.

Understanding of reality is compromised or distorted as people try to negotiate their (way of living in the) real life to meet their standard or desired norm that is possible in virtual reality. The worldviews of internet users undergo changes when they start internalizing the belief systems which used to be foreign to them. As Erikson (1959) argued that identity development is an evolving aspect, internet helps users to create and recreate themselves since the core of a person's worldview is believed to lie in his/her identity. Therefore, internet shapes users' worldview by allowing them to construct and explore their identity in the presence (as well as recognition) of their significant others. The age we live in can unquestionably be called the age of the internet (internet zeitgeist) for the Mizos as all the participants of this study asserted that their world will become a perturbing cosmos if the internet is wiped out all of a sudden after two decades of its existence in the state. Heavy dependence on the internet can definitely result in myopic worldview as the "zeitgeist of internet" brings in the concept of 'instantaneity'; users no longer have enough time to dwell on a single topic for a long time nor in-depth. The dominant worldview amongst Mizos i.e, the Christian worldview is becoming more ambiguous than ever.

This study also proves the argument of Media Dependency theory – the respondents and participants use the internet more as they get what they want from it. Internet is greatly promoting hedonism where people are engaging more in pursuit of pleasure or self-gratification, neglecting the reality of their physical world. Social Learning Theory posits that behaviour is learnt through observation and imitation, therefore, the digital immigrants in this study believed that difference in communication behaviour (or learnt behaviour from the internet) to be more evident amongst the digital natives than the immigrants as they suppose the younger internet users to adopt new behaviour from various online sources more than the older users. These types of learning can also be linked with the stages of adoption in Diffusion of Innovation Theory where individuals who learn instantly by observation and imitation can be considered as 'early adopters', those who need written text with meticulous details can be 'early majorities' and those for whom models and written text cannot have direct effect but need several attempts (practice after practice) to fully grasp something can be also be considered as the 'late majorities'.

Keywords: Culture, Digital, Internet dependency, Mizoram, Society, Worldview, Zeitgeist