



Digital Belonging Of The Meeteis In Delhi: Experiences Of Inclusion And Exclusion

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Abstract: Digital belonging allows individuals to cultivate a sense of membership and belonging within a networked space through continuous exchange and expression of views and ideas. Social media facilitates political participation within this digital network for migrants and shape how they negotiate inclusion and identity in resettlement context. This remains under-explored in the case of the Meetei community in Delhi, a minority group in India. This study examines how digital belonging of the Meetei community in Delhi, shapes their personal experience of inclusion-exclusion. 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Meetei migrants in Delhi. Thematic analysis was applied to identify key patterns through open, axial and selective coding. The study draws on spatial-digital belonging, group-differentiated rights and race-informed perspectives to identify patterns of participation, expression and inclusion-exclusion experiences of the Meetei migrant's in online spaces.

Index Terms – Digital belonging, inclusion-exclusion, social media, group-differentiated rights, Meetei

I. INTRODUCTION

The information technology revolution and the global interconnectedness of culture has changed the way we used to stay connected in the past. The impact of smartphone in our daily lives (Dávideková, 2016) and the way we connect with others is amplified, with social media platforms acting as networked spaces, where individuals negotiate membership and community. Social media and digital global networks have been extensively explored to theorize digital belonging in the context of western communities and forced-migrants (Marlowe, 2019); (Marlowe, 2020). In the context of voluntary or economic migrants and minority culture in India, the ways in which these groups experience digital networked spaces and are constrained by them remain under-explored.

Delhi, which is home to many migrants including those from ethnic minority groups, is characterized by a high degree of internet and digital connectivity making it apt for an examination of the digital and social intersection (Marlowe & Collins, 2017). The Meetei community in India represents a long-standing ethno-cultural minority with a distinct linguistic and spatial identity. When re-locating to Delhi, the Meetei migrants may face racial discrimination and limited recognition in public spheres. Racial barriers might also impact their experience of inclusion-exclusion in social media platforms and digital networks. Delhi is therefore, selected at an apt location for this study. The interconnection of spatial-digital belonging, group-differentiated rights and race-informed perspectives in Meetei people's digital experiences has yet to be theorized.

To address the gaps, the study seeks to explore two questions:

1. How do Meetei migrants in Delhi access and experience digital media to construct a sense of belonging?
2. What barriers—technological, spatial or racial—shape their digital inclusion and exclusion?

The research seeks to analyse the spatial aspect of belonging using the digital space to give a new dimension to “digital belonging”. Digital space offers a new kind of belonging to people from minority culture by exploring social connections and a sense of self as well as experience participation from a new dimension (Hannaford, 2016). For this qualitative study, 26 Meetei people living in Delhi were interviewed to analyze how digital belonging influences individual’s personal experiences of inclusion-exclusion for people from minority culture. The findings highlight that there is a new sense of digital belonging felt, which allows people from minority cultures to comfortably increase their participation and experience some degree of inclusion. However, apprehensions still loom large as the polar opposite experience of strolling has also been experienced by participants from time to time. In conclusion, some recommendations have been made for considering future areas of research to explore the comfort of political discourse in the digital space and transitioning the experience to the physical society. Digital ethnography would also be an interesting method giving researchers a detailed scope to observe the exchange of interaction and real time degree of involvement by people from minority cultures in the digital space.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of digital belonging comprises the online social media platforms where individuals interact with others within networked environments. It transforms online platforms into spaces where individuals feel connected and establish a sense of membership, identity and community. Existing literature highlights how digital belonging intersects with migration politics and race through the lens of group-differentiated rights and race-informed perspectives.

2.1 Digital Belonging

There are multiple open conceptualisation of belonging that either situates belonging in “socio-spatial” forms or in experience of inclusion and exclusion. Antonsich (2010) draws attention to the ‘multi-scalarity’ of belonging, that provides security and comfort to oneself as well as the social and physical environment. One can extend this understanding to the digital contexts as “feeling at home” experienced online by individuals. Belonging is also conceptualised as multi-layered (Yuval-Davis, 2006) as it intersects people’s identities with their socio-political context (Marlowe & Collins, 2017). Extending from these explanation, digital belonging is an outcome of digital connectivity (Hannaford, 2016), and how social media allows people to connect with families and friends back home (Marlowe & Collins, 2017). The ongoing process of interaction and recognition and how individuals establish we-feeling within networked platforms, posit digital belonging as social constructed through platform affordances and user practices.

Digital spaces, here is understood as online networked or digital media such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp, where users connect, engage and express themselves, experiencing belonging.

Thus, the transformation through digital technologies have brought a completely new dimension of understanding belonging. Digital media allows the creation of a space that is neither here nor there and at the same time create new possibilities of connection (Ponzanesi, 2021). A larger portion of daily social interactions and being connected now takes place in social media platforms and network sites like Facebook or Instagram. The virtual spaces of the digital world thus provide belonging and continuity to people, through continuous communication thereby forming social relationship (Hannaford, 2016). Digital belonging is therefore seen as a tool to analyse personal experience of inclusion-exclusion through individuals’ participation and expression in the digitally networked spaces that recognise and accommodate their diversity.

Social media has been regularly used by forced migrants and refugees to negotiate new forms of belonging and to undermine political exclusions (Marlowe J. , 2020). Existing studies highlight how these social media platforms enable political mobilization of transnational nature and at the same time enforces surveillance to reproduce power imbalance. These frameworks provide a critical lens to analyse how digital platforms constrain or allow minority migrants to express their views and thoughts. Another study on ageing migrants in Victoria, Australia also highlights how these individuals stayed connected within their networks (Cabalquinto, 2024) by consuming Covid-19 information through digital channels. Here belonging is mediated through circulation and consumption of information related to Covis-19. Cabalquinto (2024) introduces the notion of “enclaved belonging” to explain how the ageing migrants establish a sense of safety and support through

their networks. Drawing from this, we can examine how platform affordances, expression and recognition practices and power dynamics shape online inclusion-exclusion experiences of minority groups.

2.2 Minority Culture and Inclusion

Minority can be used to describe groups which are culturally, ethnically, or racially distinct that co-exists with a more dominant group but are considered subordinate. (Britannica, 2019). Subordinacy is the chief defining feature of a minority group (Johnson & Callahan, 2013) whose members are denied access to social and economic statuses. This can be a cultural group that is socially segregated and cut off from full involvement in society's functioning and debarred of equal share in society's rewards (Britannica, 2019). Will Kymlicka (1995) in Multicultural citizenship while focussing on multiculturalism emphasises on the recognition and positive accommodation of minority group practice and refer to this as 'group-differentiated rights'. These poly ethnic rights are important steps towards ending racism and discrimination and allow scope of recognition and positive accommodation of cultural. For the purpose of this study, attempt has been made to flip this approach and take into consideration whether digital belonging can be viewed as offering recognition and positive accommodation (Song, 2020) that permits individuals from minority cultural groups the freedom from domination and equality of cultural membership more than mere inclusion of the right to vote. Other literatures on minority culture have assessed inclusion through engagement of members from these groups in society's activities (DESA, 2009). Drawing from Kymlicka's group-differentiated rights and using the lens of engagement in society's activities, whether there is full participation of individuals from minority culture in the digital spaces can be assessed. This intersecting framework of inclusion and digital engagement would be useful to study the under-explored digital experiences of Meetei migrants in Delhi.

2.3 Meetei People Living in Delhi

The metropolitan area of Delhi, has an estimated total population of nearly 16.7 million according to Census 2011 (STATISTICS), 2022). Nearly, 40% of Delhi's population (about 6.3 million) comprise of migrants from other Indian states (Kawoosa, 2019). With Delhi becoming the migrant capital of India, with the city's booming services economy and its highest per capita income (Network, 2018). However, migrants from the North-Eastern states of India comprises merely 3% (Review, 2022) of the 40% migrant population. Manipur has the highest number of migration from the North Eastern India (Lusome & Bhagat, 2020) and larger population migrate to places like Delhi for higher study and better job opportunities. Of this migrants population, only 3,892 people belong to the Meetei community (PopulationU, 2019).

Meeteis commonly known as Manipuris, numbering about 1.5 million in the early 21st century, is the predominant ethnic group and native to the state of Manipur in North-Eastern India. While they speak a Tibeto-Burman language and their physical features denote Mongoloid lineages, culturally they follow Hindu customs claiming high-caste status (Meitei, 2015). As Meetei people follow Hindu customs, many of the cultural practices of the Meetei migrants might be similar to that of the dominant group. However, they are simply viewed as others due to their distinct physical appearances (McDuie-Ra, 2012). Thus, the state of racism defines the experience of Meetei migrants as similar to that of other migrants from the north-eastern states living in Delhi. Like the other Northeast migrants, the Meeteis in Delhi are also seen as racially different from other migrants and the mainstream dominant group (Remesh, 2012) and therefore can be considered as a racially subordinate group. Majority of the Meetei population migrates to Delhi for higher studies and better job opportunities. With a higher literacy as compared to migrants from other parts of India, most of them are employed in jobs requiring soft skills expertise such as aviation, call-centre, etc. or in academic sectors. Existing studies focus on understanding the racial discrimination faced by people from the Northeast and there is limited literature specifically pertaining to the Meetei migrants' experiences. Though, the issue of racial discrimination faced by the north-eastern migrants has been extensively researched, the participation and recognition of the Meetei people in the digital space is still under-explored.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research study is weaved around the core of digital belonging, using a quadrant framework, interlocking four key theoretical concepts (spatial belonging, group-differentiated rights, race-informed digital affordances and enclaved belonging), to analyze the online inclusion-exclusion experiences of the Meetei migrants in Delhi.

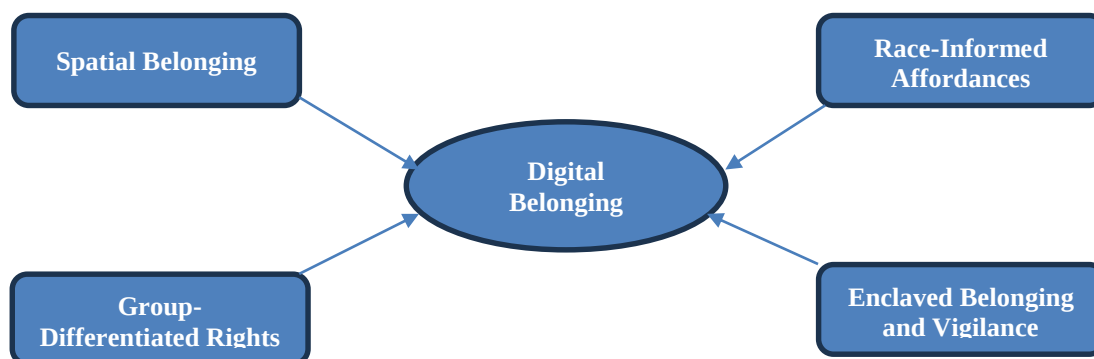


Figure 1: Quadrant-Theoretical Framework of Digital Belonging

Spatial Belonging is seen as a sense of security and membership in day-to-day interactions occurring in multi-scalar (Antonsich, 2010) environments (private, community, public). It is further located at the intersection of personal identity, socio-political context and power dynamics, providing multi-layered identifications (Yuval-Davis, 2006). When applied to digital contexts, these layers manifest in peer-to-peer connect (WhatsApp), community (private Facebook groups) and public events (Facebook events). Interlinked to this, Will Kymlicka's in "Multicultural Citizenship" emphasize on group-differentiated rights (Kymlicka, 1995) that asserts positive accommodation and legal and social recognition of minority group's distinct cultural practices, towards ending racism and discrimination. This perspective is extended to digital media and assess how it recognise and accommodate cultural citizenship apart from civic rights. Third, the concept of affordance (Dijk, 2013) is interlinked and analysed using a race-informed lens to assess how digital platform designs shapes or constrain minority cultural expressions. Racial and technological barriers are further added to demonstrate non-neutrality of digital affordances. Further, Enclaved belonging (Caballero, 2024) is interlinked to provide marginalized groups with safe and supportive networks to counter exclusion. Private groups and live-streaming channels act as enclaves for minority groups where cultural narratives are not curated but receive secured recognition. Further, migrants enact protective vigilance for guarding against misinformation and hostility, adding a resilience dimension to digital belonging. Through this quadrant framework, these theoretical lenses would examine how the Meetei migrants in Delhi shape their digital belonging.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research study is based on exploring the digital belonging of the Meeteis in Delhi and their personal experiences of inclusion-exclusion.

3.1 Research Design

The study employs a qualitative exploratory design to examine the digital belonging of the Meetei migrants in Delhi and their experience of inclusion-exclusion in the digital spaces. Using semi-structured interviews, this research focuses on contextualizing the spatial-digital experiences rather than testing pre-determined hypotheses.

3.2 Participants

Semi-structured interview was conducted by meeting 26 Meetei adult migrants, currently residing in various parts of Delhi. Participants were selected keeping three aspects in mind, affordance to digital spaces, active expressions and regular access to social media. The respondents were selected using snowball sampling technique, by reaching out to two community contacts. This helped in gaining access to the targeted population group required for the study. Each participant further referred one or two peers, who were available and willing to participate. Diversity was ensured in terms of age gender and occupation. Meetei people living in Delhi have been thoughtfully considered for this study, as it fits the description of minority culture using the subordination angle and racial-informed perspective. Most of the respondents were employed in jobs requiring soft skills

expertise such as aviation, call-centre, etc. or in academic sectors. Thus, the respondents naturally appear to be familiar with digital spaces.

3.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interview with 12 questions were used to guide the data collection:

1. Which digital platforms do you access most often, and why?
2. How much time do you typically spend online each day?
3. Can you describe how you share Meetei cultural practices digitally?
4. What makes you feel comfortable or uncomfortable expressing your identity online?
5. Have you ever experienced negative reactions when you post?
6. What barriers do you encounter while being online?
7. In what ways do digital spaces support your sense of community?
8. Can you recall an unexpected or novel use of social media in your daily life?
9. How do you use online groups or hashtags to connect with other Meeteis?
10. Do you feel that the online platforms / groups recognize and accommodate your cultural practices?
11. What challenges do you face when accessing social media?
12. How has your online participation influenced your offline sense of belonging?

Each interview took 30-45 minutes and were conducted in person. All sessions were audio-recorded and note taken, which were later transcribed.

3.4 Data Analysis

To analyse the data findings, thematic analysis was employed by following a three-stage process. Open-coding generated 41 distinct codes (such as recognition of culture, connected, misinformation, discrimination, etc.). Further, axial coding was applied to look at the open codes and eight categories (access, participation, expression, recognition, inclusion, exclusion and barriers) were finalized to assemble the open codes within linked categories. Finally, five primary emergent themes (participation, expression and recognition, racial and technical barriers, affordances and misinformation vigilance) were identified from the seven broad categories.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Anonymity of all participants have been maintained and informed consent were obtained. The notes and transcripts from the interviews have been used only for the purpose of this research.

V. DATA FINDINGS

4.1 Participant Profiles

Table 4.1: Participant Profiles

Respondents' Profile							
Gender / Age		Qualification			Career		
		Undergraduate	Post Graduate	Others	Student	Working	Non-Working
Male	18 - 25 YRS	1	1	1	3	2	0
	25 – 35 YRS	2	7		0	7	0
Female	18 - 25 YRS	2	0	1	3	0	0
	25 – 35 YRS	1	6	4	5	5	1
Total		6	14	6	11	14	1
Percentage		23.1%	53.8%	23.1%	42.3%	53.8%	3.8%

Table 4.1 displays the respondents' profiles. Out of the 26 respondents interviewed, six has completed graduation, 14 are post graduates and six have other qualifications. Respondents were consciously selected to span across age and two age range are identified, 18-25 years (5 participants) and 25-35 years (21 participants). Further, the sample represents an even gender split (50% male, 50% female)

Based on the initial coding, 41 distinct codes were generated which were then classified into eight axial categories. Finally, five main themes emerged which highlighted the digital belonging of the Meetei migrants in Delhi. For the ease of interpretation and discussion, the data findings for each emergent theme have been taken separately.

4.2 Cultural Participation and Community Building

Table 4.2: Cultural Participation and Community Building

Open Codes	Axial Category	Emergent Theme	Description
Peer advice in WhatsApp groups	Participation	Cultural Participation & Community Building	How Meetei migrants actively use digital spaces to organize events, share advice and sustain communal ties.
Event coordination via Facebook	Participation		
Crowdfunding for cultural projects	Participation		
Mental-health check-ins online	Participation		
Emergency relief coordination	Participation		
Virtual language classes	Participation		
Crowdfunding festival costs	Participation		
Taken part in an online protests	Participation		

As table 4.2 displays, the first theme to have emerged from the data is Cultural participation and community building that describes how the Meetei migrants in Delhi actively engage in digital spaces for cultural participation and community building. It highlights the use of digital spaces to organize events, share and sustain communal ties as participants shared.

Excerpt 1

"I have used online mode to register to vote, I have taken part in an online government survey, I have taken part in an online protest, joined an online campaign, signed a petition."

Excerpt 2

"Our WhatsApp group is where we plan festival dates, share funds via GoFundMe links, and even check in on each other's well-being when someone's under stress."

As the above excerpts shows, digital platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp are used effectively for organizing community events or as civic-action spaces demonstrating how Meetei migrants living in Delhi leverage social media for collective agency and community solidarity.

4.3 Digital Expression and Identity Recognition

Table 4.3 Digital Expression and Identity Recognition

Open Codes	Axial Category	Emergent Theme	Description
Posting festival photos/videos	Expression	Digital Expression & Identity Recognition	The ways participants voice Meetei culture online, through posts, live streams and hashtags, and how these acts foster visible cultural presence.
Writing cultural blogs	Expression		
Live-streaming rituals/events	Expression		
Using language-learning channels	Expression		
Always comfortable expressing identity	Expression		
Sometimes comfortable, sometimes not	Expression		
#MeeteiCulture	Recognition		
Private “Meetei Delhi” group	Recognition		
“Northeast Diaspora” public group	Recognition		
Festival/event pages	Recognition		
High perceived recognition	Recognition		
Medium perceived recognition	Recognition		
Low perceived recognition	Recognition		

Table 4.3 highlights the third emergent theme, digital expression and identity recognition that show the ways in which Meetei people living in Delhi express Meetei culture in digital spaces by live streaming an event, posting about cultural celebrations, using hashtags (such as #meeteiculture), etc. The Meetei people also feel that it is easier for them to promote their culture in the digital space as it provides several platforms and allow them to create a new way of expressing their cultural practices.

Excerpt 3

“Digital space has provided several platforms where millions of people can put forth their opinion on an issue. It helps in spreading awareness faster. It has provided a new identity to each and every one in different ways”.

Excerpt 4

“Social groups allow me to share photos, videos and post that I wish to share about my culture with others and people are keen on knowing more. Many people in the group mentioned having been to Manipur and tasted Meetei cuisines. There is even a restaurant “Eatpham” that serves Meetei food and I came to know about it through social media.”

The Meetei migrants in Delhi have carved visible digital spaces for Meetei culture by posting creative contents (photos / live-streaming, blogs) expressing Meetei identity. They are comfortable sharing about their culture online and engaging with broader networked audiences. This displays a sense of positive accommodation and respondents felt other group members were aware of their culture and there is recognition of cultural practices followed by the Meetei people. Social media has led to growing recognition of Meetei culture in the physical public spaces too, with other community people becoming more aware and tolerant. This recognition and increase in acceptance of Meetei people, reinforces their sense of belonging and cultural pride online. Thus, recognition metrics (likes, group memberships) become symbolic proof of cultural accommodation and belonging in the wider networked public.

4.4 Racial and Technical Barriers to Inclusion

Table 4.4 Barriers to Inclusion

Open Codes	Axial Category	Emergent Theme	Description
Experiencing racial trolling	Racial Barriers	Racial & Technical Barriers to Inclusion	The combined impact of racialised attacks and platform limitations that can limit full digital belonging.
Receiving hateful emojis/comments	Racial Barriers		
Hate speech/comments	Racial Barriers		
Stereotype-based ridicule	Racial Barriers		
Fear of negative comments	Technical Barriers		
Spotty Connectivity	Technical Barriers		
Anonymity increases comfort	Technical Barriers		
Being removed or muted by admins	Exclusion		
Self-censorship after backlash	Exclusion		

In Table 4.4, the racial and technical barriers to inclusion are highlighted and assess how these barriers (racialised attacks and platform limitations) impact the Meetei migrants and whether it limits their full digital belonging. Some respondents mentioned being required to be on guard, as there are a lot of misinformation. It may be tricky to verify who is real, therefore digital social interactions needs to be monitored, else it may lead to unhealthy outcomes.

Excerpt 5

“It is a scary prospect. One never knows who is on the other side in the virtual space. Connectivity and interactive features are the saving graces but misused more often than not.”

Excerpt 6

“Once I got dozens of racist slurs, I quietly removed it. And, now I only post when I’m sure the group is friendly.”

While the respondents display an increased digital belonging, some respondents mentioned being required to be on guard while using digital platforms as it may lead to unhealthy outcomes. Participants feel that it is important to be sensitive and sensible while voicing themselves or taking part in any activities as anything can be easily negated by the networked audiences. Some participants have shared facing double barriers especially overt racial attacks (trolling, racial slurs) and platform blind spots (security settings, spotty connectivity). Thus, the findings highlights some instances of exclusionary moderation (removals) and self-censorship that pinpoints both personal apprehension (fear of hostility) and structural friction (unreliable connections). These racial and technical barriers limits the safe expression of culture and identity and undermine participants’ confidence to fully engage online or losing interest to post. Hence, pinpointing the fragility of digital belonging when power dynamics collide with technical limitations.

4.5 Platform Affordances and Constraints

Table 4.5 Affordances and Constraints to digital platforms

Open Codes	Axial Category	Emergent Theme	Description
Facebook for cultural updates	Platform Features)	Platform Affordances & Constraints	How specific features (group moderation, tagging, streaming tools) enable cultural practices but also embed biases—determining what can be shared and seen.
Instagram for photo/video sharing	Platform Features)		
YouTube for tutorials/news	Platform Features)		
WhatsApp for community chat	Platform Features)		
Twitter/Reddit for political discourse	Platform Features)		
1–4 hrs/day	Access		
5–8 hrs/day	Access		
8–10 hrs/day	Access		
Almost entire day	Access		

Table 4.5 communicates that every social media platforms come with specific features (group moderation, tagging, streaming) that may allow expression of cultural identity but at the same time might constraint full digital belonging due to race-informed biasedness, determining what can be shared and seen. Another important parameter highlighted, is the group's affordance ability in terms of access to and time spent in these digital spaces. While digital space has given a new sense of experiencing inclusion by blurring the line created by social/racial identity, one needs to be on guard. The digital technologies especially smartphones has made it easier to be part of digital spaces such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and service provider apps. There is comfort in connecting with people through online interactions that suggest there is an increase in digital belonging. Other participants also expressed that digital interactions has started to become more preferable than face-to-face interactions.

Excerpt 7

"I spend almost the entire day on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube—they let me join groups, share videos and chat with fellow Meeteis whenever I need."

Excerpt 8

"Facebook allowed me to post about our Ningol Chakauba festival, but some other community people started commenting racial slurs. I did not remove the post but it was taxing to defend myself".

The ability of the Meetei migrants to afford high daily usage in digital platforms reflects not only their keenness and resilience, but also their comfort is ensuring visibility of their culture in these digital spaces by regularly posting and commenting. While each platform comes with specific tools (groups events, tagging, live streaming) enabling cultural participation, its embedded algorithms and exchange of race-biased perspectives may constraint user-experience learning to frustrating experiences. Thus, the digital platforms being used and the nature of interaction being engaged in can constraint digital belonging of the Meetei migrants despite their ability to afford high usage in these digital spaces.

4.6 Misinformation Vigilance & Trust

Table 4.6 Misinformation Vigilance & Trust

Open Codes	Axial Category	Emergent Theme	Description
Self-censorship after backlash	Barriers	Misinformation Vigilance & Trust	Participants' emerging practices of fact-checking, cautious sharing and mental-health check-ins to navigate and counter unreliable or harmful content.
Mental-health check-ins online	Participation		
Digital vs. physical trust issues	Exclusion		

Table 4.6 displays how participants' experiences of misinformation and racial slurs have established the practice of fact-checking, cautious sharing and mental-health check-ins to navigate and counter unreliable or harmful contents.

Excerpt 9

"Everything in the digital space cannot be deemed credible. There is no replacement to real time in flesh and blood."

Excerpt 10

"I always fact-check a news link before sharing in our group—there's too much fake info, and I don't want to stir panic."

While digitalization has given a newfound sense of digital belonging, its negative impacts cannot be ignored. Beyond overt hostility, participants also deal with an overload of unverified content. Participants shared the need for being vigilant and practice caution (fact-checking, limiting trust), as misinformation and impersonality can reduce their sense of secure digital belonging. They also highlighted the need for mental-health pauses to guard against misinformation's toxic effects. These highlights how misinformation vigilance shapes what they share and how they relate to online communities. It also establishes how trust (or its absence) becomes a critical component of digital belonging.

VI. DISCUSSION

5.1 Summary of Findings

The major findings of the study highlights collective digital participation of the Meetei migrants in Delhi as they actively leverage on digital platforms (Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, etc.) to reinforce offline community bonding through posting upcoming events, fundraising and engaging in civic actions. These Meetei migrants in Delhi share experiencing digital belonging with recognition of their culture and identity within the larger networked audiences, through posts about festivals and rituals, live-streaming events and dedicated hashtags and groups. Their affordance of high daily usage and the comfort of expressing their culture, converts these platforms into "digital homelands". However, experience of racial trolling, technical constraints and self-censorship limits full digital inclusion, thereby establishing the practice of fact-checking and cautious trust.

5.2 Interpretation

The framework that belonging is established through our everyday practices and mutual recognition of interaction in multi-scalar spaces (Antonsich, 2010) is re-, as the data findings highlighting how the Meetei migrants in Delhi use WhatsApp and Facebook events to create communal bonding. The respondents participation in the digital spaces extend much beyond cultural expression and incorporate civic actions too. As one respondent shared *"I have taken part in many online protests and have donated for causes through crowdfunding for causes I believe in, applied from my voter ID online. I have also taken part in many online government surveys."* By doing so, they not only express their cultural identity but also establish political agency, highlighting that belonging is not a simple, static identity but layered with set of affiliations defined

by broader socio-political contexts (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Further, the digital platforms' affordances (usage, access, hashtags, groups, etc.) is what creates comfort and a sense of belonging (Hannafor, 2016). The participants constant access of the internet and high usage of these digital platforms daily, gives them the affordance to experience digital belonging as one participant highlights *"Social groups allow me to share photos, videos and post that I wish to share about my culture with others and people are keen on knowing more"*. These affordance not only facilitate communication and expression but also construct a safe, recognisable "digital enclave" (Cabalquinto, 2024) where the Meetei migrants experience mutual support and cultural continuity despite being geographically distanced from the homeland.

From dedicated hashtags and social media groups, the Meetei migrants are collectively claiming to protect and promote their distinct cultural practices and institutions such as rituals, festivals, language, food, etc. This suggest group-differentiated rights (Kymlicka, 1995) in action, as digital platforms offer positive accommodation to the participants that is often lacked offline. One participant expressed, *"There are many content available on the internet related to our culture. I am happy to see some films covering the social and cultural life of people from the North East. You can find many in OTT platforms like Netflix."* He also observes *"People have started to recognise our differential features."* Others highlight how digital space has been set as a level playing field in terms of age or gender *"Digital platform is gender neutral which give opportunity to all."* Thus, these digital platforms has given a new sense of experiencing inclusion by blurring the line created by social/racial identity and allows the Meetei people to include themselves in many activities of the society. These practices have helped in establishing minority cultural membership beyond mere political rights to full cultural citizenship. This resonate Cabalquinto's (2024) concept of "enclaved belonging", where ageing migrants provided safety and cultural continuity during Covid-19. Similarly, the Meetei migrants' in Delhi using dedicated hashtags (#meeteiculture) and creating social media groups can be identified as enclaves that positively accommodate minority cultural practices online.

Experiencing full digital belonging is often curtailed due to existing power dynamics reasserting the co-existence of digital subversion with subjugation (Marlowe J., 2019) of minority community, often reproducing existing offline hierarchies. Existence of racial slurring in online platform *"Once I got dozens of racist slurs, I quietly removed it...now I only post when I'm sure the group is friendly,"* depicts how Meetei migrants have to navigate digital structural barriers that curtail inclusion despite actively constructing belonging. *"People are slowly recognising that we are Indians. However, outside we still face racial discrimination."* illustrates how digital spaces can both empower and marginalize communities. Apart from this, there are lot of misinformation that circulates in these online platforms forcing participants to adopt cautious sharing practices, *"There is a lot of misinformation... I know when to disengage and preserve my peace,"* and *"I always fact-check a news link before sharing"* forces individuals to practice misinformation vigilance (Hine, 2015) by adopting caution. This highlights that trust is central in sustaining digital belonging within existing constraints.

5.3 Theoretical Contributions

This study theorizes digital belonging as a dual-axis framework established on affirmative practices (expression, recognition, participation) and protective strategies (misinformation-vigilance, self-censorship) over digital networked spaces. Secondly, a race-informed critical lens is applied to assess the concept of affordance (Dijck, 2013) in digital platforms and how it shapes its active usages and experiences. The findings of the study highlights that affordances in digital platforms aren't "race-neutral" tools, therefore can amplify or reduce racial bias. Thus, studying digital experiences of any minority groups should ensure to take a race-informed perspectives and assess how the platform's design enable or curtail digital belonging on people from racialised groups. Further, the study extends onto Kymlicka's (1995) group-differentiated rights, by assessing how affordances of digital platforms such as hashtags, and social media groups promote positive accommodation of minority cultural practices in a newer ways that traditional physical spaces cannot. The study further highlights that digital belonging encompasses cultural recognition with political rights, enacting a multi-dimensional enactment of group-differentiated rights (promoting ritual practices and participating in online petition). It further extends the idea that for digital belonging to be fully experienced, group-differentiated rights must be defended and enacted. And, digital enclaves (Cabalquinto, 2024) like the social media groups not only enable collective solidarity but act as a buffer against exclusion. Further to this, the study identifies misinformation-vigilance and fact-checking as emergent practices safeguarding minority expressions, as a new added dimension to how group-differentiated rights where the minority groups not only has the right to be heard but also the right to safe and trustworthy spaces. Finally, group-differentiated rights in the context of digital platforms should be assessed using a race-informed lens to ensure that platform affordances are accountable to cultural justice.

5.4 Practical Implications

The practical implications of the study highlights that platform designs should be inclusive and platform affordances should be designed using race-informed approach. Digital awareness camps should be organised to boost digital literacy and provide fact-checking training by the community either by approaching the government or collaborating with non-governmental organisations. Meetei associations can partner with local authorities and seek for collaboration with social media companies in monitoring hate speech against the migrants and promote culturally sensitive content.

5.5 Limitation and Future Research

Snow-ball sampling technique might have over-represented digitally active individuals, limiting generalization of less connected Meetei migrants from Delhi. Focussing on major social-media might have introduced platform-biasedness. Covering other emerging apps might highlight different affordances and barriers. Future research, may focus on examining digital belonging of other north-eastern migrants in Delhi or other cities and comparing its findings. Changes in participation patterns and trust practices can be assessed as platform policies evolves to assess its race-informed angle. Mapping Meetei online networks can be useful for identifying central actors and how belonging is curated.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study investigated how Meetei migrant in Delhi experience digital belonging through their use of various online social media platforms, by asking:

1. How do Meetei migrants in Delhi access and experience digital media to construct a sense of belonging?
2. What barriers—technological, spatial or racial—shape their digital inclusion and exclusion?

After employing thematic analysis, five primary themes (cultural participation and community building, digital expression and identity recognition, racial and technological barriers, platform affordances and constraints, misinformation vigilance and trust) emerged from the findings.

The Meetei migrants use multiple digital platforms daily (WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram), with most of them being online for more than five hours daily showing high access and reliance on digital media. By announcing organization of events, crowdfunding social causes, engaging in civic campaigns and establishing peer-support networks, they reinforce offline solidarity in online spaces, mirroring offline community life in digital form. Using dedicated hashtags and sharing creative contents regarding their cultural practices, these migrants claim visibility and cultural pride. These posts translate private community traditions into public recognition, a sense of “home” online (digital belonging) and reinforces identity.

Though these experiences establish digital belonging, the findings also highlights racial and technological barriers that shape their digital inclusion or exclusion. Racial trolling, hate speech and limited script support forces self-censorship and highlights platform affordances biasedness, limiting full participation. Further, misinformation vigilance and fact-checking are used as protective strategies to establish affirmative practices (expression, recognition, participation) that shape inclusion in the digital spaces and thereby protecting digital belonging. Finally, digital belonging is seen as a dual-axis model enacted through affirmative cultural-civic practices, promoting group-differentiated rights and protective enclaved strategies through a race-informed power dynamics. Further studies should employ digital ethnography to explore other minority communities on digital platforms, and apply race-informed lens in depth to evaluate how platform design choices affect marginalized users rights and belonging.

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