

## From Oral tales to Online threads: Digital Folklore and the Reimagining of Meeteilon identity

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### Abstract

The paper is about the fate of a language when fireside folktales are re-established as Facebook posts and Instagram stories. Shifting attention towards Meeteilon, one which was perpetuated by oral traditions, the paper discusses the way in which digital space is reasserting its definition of the language in the era of migration, education, and globalised cultural exchange. The study examines the use of humour, memes, abbreviations, and internet slang as new linguistic creativity by younger speakers, especially those between the age of 22 and 27, by relying on the responses of eighty-nine respondents in the context of rural, semi-urban, urban, and outside-Manipur. The results reveal that nowadays, social media sites serve as the new fireplaces in which collaborative laughter, inside jokes, and cultural memories continue to make Meeteilon alive. The rural users will be more likely to keep the older vocabulary, whereas the urban speakers are more likely to engage in more code-mixing due to peer networks and international media. Structural problems that the participants observed were also perceived as lexical gaps and a lack of digital typing equipment. Interestingly, a lot of new slangs have a history to older words, as well as 1990s-2000s Manipuri films, which suggests the idea that reinvention most of the time functions as remembrance. In general, the research claims that digital folklore does not presuppose the linguistic recession, but rather a negotiation of transformation between the traditional and modern worlds, which allows Meeteilon to rebrand its identity in the postcolonial, globalised era.

**Keywords:** Digital Folklore, Hybrid, Linguistic creativity, Meeteilon, Memes

Received: November 07, 2025

Revised: December 11, 2025

Accepted: December 12, 2025

Published: December 12, 2025

Citation:

Pukhrambam, I., Devi, S. (2025). From Oral tales to Online threads: Digital Folklore and the Reimagining of Meeteilon identity. *S3R Academia*, 2(2), 10-19. <https://doi.org/10.70682/s3r.2025.07>

### 1. Introduction

The modern society, in which news propagates more rapidly on social media than through the traditional news media, a brief scroll through any urban youth feed in Imphal will show Meeteilon being constantly revised and reconfigured between tradition and trend. The emergence of new genres of folklore because of new digital forms of communication (memes, captions, reels, and short videos) can only be decoded through the shared cultural codes and various histories, which the researchers of digital folklore

refer to as the participatory and fast-moving quality of online culture production (Melnikova, 2020; Muktopāvela, 2018). These online expressions are a contemporary, living folklore where every post, joke, and viral phrase reflects cultural memory, humour, and identity, as a form of self-expression, community building, and cultural preservation. These types of hybrid performances correspond to more general arguments regarding the dynamic movement of digital identities along linguistic and cultural borders (Darvin, 2015).

The minority languages, such as Meeteilon, are gaining the chance to be reinvented in the online world. Instead of its decline, the online space alters and transforms the tradition into an interactive and constantly changing medium between the past and the present, reminding us of how internet humour and memes can create a sense of identity among the younger generation (Gal et al., 2016). After being told around firesides, Meeteilon tales now reappear on the screens of smartphones, and they are now a component of an ever-expanding digital environment of indigenous and regional languages.

Digital spaces are actively reorganizing the use, sharing and experience of language. This paper examines how Meeteilon is fitting into the online worlds, as to whether it is being watered down, diversified, or re-invented about humour, remixing and hybridity. These trends of code-mixing and multilingual creativity in online communication are similar to patterns of code-mixing and multilingual creativity found in online discourse around the world (Barman et al., 2014; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). Based on the replies provided by 89 respondents who participated in an online survey conducted with the help of a Google Form, the paper analyzes such aspects of Meeteilon as code-mixing, lexical innovation, visual storytelling, and emotional negotiations that contribute to the formation of the digital identity of Meeteilon. Although traditional folklore used to keep Manipuri communities alive through their common myths and oral stories, the current memes, reels, and captions are a sign of the digital folklore, which is a type of collective memory that appeals to the younger generations (Joseph, 2023; Oswald et al., 2023).

The study aims to achieve two main purposes:

1. To investigate the process and expression of Meeteilon by the younger users through slang, memes, and digital communication.
2. To examine the social and technological issues affecting the move by Meeteilon to the digital folklore.

## **2. Literature review**

Recent scholarship demonstrates that digital culture critically reshapes how minority languages adapt, survive, and transform in online environments. Muktopāvela (2018) argues that memes now function as micro-folklore units that circulate cultural humour, social critique, and shared identity across platforms. Melnikova (2020) similarly notes that digital folklore evolves through the participatory logic of social media, where anonymity, remixing, and rapid circulation continuously regenerate meaning. These dynamics are particularly visible among multilingual youth. Darvin (2015) shows that digital spaces allow fluid performance of identity, enabling speakers to shift between linguistic styles that signal belonging, modernity, or cultural intimacy. This fluidity is reinforced by the increasing normalisation of code-mixing.

Barman et al. (2014) identify how users creatively merge languages within a single utterance, reflecting peer norms and platform affordances.

More recent studies deepen the connection between digital practices and linguistic identity. Michael (2021) finds that when Indigenous languages appear in everyday online spaces, they become emotionally salient for younger generations, strengthening cultural attachment. However, technological inequalities continue to influence linguistic survival. Zhang (2020) and newer work by Sharma (2024) show that minority languages face digital disadvantages—limited keyboard systems, poor predictive text, and a lack of AI-driven writing tools—pushing speakers toward dominant languages. Siebenhutter (2025) describes this tension as a two-fold process whereby digital participation reinforces linguistic belonging but, at the same time, reinforces hierarchies that marginalise smaller languages.

More recent Scopus-indexed studies (2021–2025) provide crucial insights into youth linguistic behaviour. Research on Saudi and Asian digital learners shows that social media creates new patterns of creativity, hybrid expression, and cultural negotiation (Sharma, 2019; Sharma & Begum, 2024a). The rise of meme linguistics and online humour demonstrates how digital narratives have become powerful sites of identity formation (Joseph, 2023). Work on intercultural competence (Sharma, 2020) supports the argument that hybrid language practices are not deficiencies but deliberate identity performances. Additionally, emerging research on AI-supported language revitalisation (Sharma, 2024b) emphasises the urgent need for digital tools to sustain minority languages online.

Taken together, this body of research situates digital platforms as effective sociolinguistic ecosystems in which identity, humour, cultural memory, and technological constraints interplay. Yet very little scholarship focuses on how these dynamics shape Meeteilon specifically. This study fills that gap by analysing how memes, code-mixing, emotional expression, and digital participation reshape Meeteilon identity in online spaces.

### **3. Methodology**

The study utilized the mixed-method descriptive research design based on on-line Google Form survey to explore the use, perception and re-branding of Meeteilon in online settings. Eighty-nine individuals answered the questionnaire, representing diverse geographical areas, including urban (49.4%), rural (10.1%), semi-urban (20.2%), and outside-Manipur areas (20.2%) with the majority of them falling within the age bracket of 22-30, a group that is highly digital savvy and online. The purposive sampling method was used to recruit people that either frequently use Meeteilon or regularly consume digital content that contains the language. The survey link was shared on the social media platform, including WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook, as it was voluntary, and no personal information could be traced. The questionnaire included closed and open-ended questions, which covered frequency of language use across platforms, disposition to digital hybridisation, perceptions of the linguistic decline or revitalisation, encounters with memes, slang, and code-mixing, affective attachment to Meeteilon, and technological constraints including typing systems and input constraints. The two experts in digital linguistics were consulted in enhancing content validity, and some minor changes were implemented according to their

feedback. The quantitative data were the subject of descriptive statistics, whereas the qualitative responses were subjected to a six-step thematic analysis framework, as designed by Braun and Clarke (2006), familiarisation, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting, with the themes being generated inductively based on a commonality in the dataset. These quotations of the participants were carefully selected to support the analytic claims but not excessively to rely on the descriptive quotes. Throughout the study, ethics were upheld where participants got the purpose of the research, and were assured of voluntary participation, and got a right to drop out at any time, no identifying information was gathered and hence anonymity and confidentiality.

## **4. Findings and Discussions**

### ***4.1 The New Fireside: Language on media platforms and Digital Habits***

A remarkable 48.9% of respondents reported that they “always” use Meeteilon online, while 28.4% use it often. Few participants reported that they avoid using Meeteilon as it has limited vocabulary and they cannot express himself fully upto an extent where there exist some words or expressions that cannot be translated where gaps between languages that cannot be filled by translation or transliteration always prevails. This reveals that, contrary to fears of decline and suppression, a considerable part of speakers continues to support their linguistic identity even in the global digital village. However, 50.6% said they mix English, Hindi, and Meeteilon, suggesting that hybridity, rather than purity, defines the new linguistic norm to connect, communicate and send the language and culture conveniently and efficiently. Meanwhile, 41.6% were recorded to use only Meeteilon as a symbol of pride and familiarise. Research on Saudi and Asian digital learners shows that social media creates new patterns of creativity, hybrid expression, and cultural negotiation (Sharma, 2019; Sharma & Begum, 2024a).

For many, Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp and Youtube now function as contemporary equivalents of the fireside, spaces and mediums of sharing, humour, sarcasm, relatability and collective identity-making, cultural transmission, inspirational reliance, cultural awakening. The report obtained showed that a higher percentage mostly use Meeteilon while on digital hubs, confirming that informal and intimate exchanges are still vital zones of linguistic vitality, while formal hotspots require a borrowing of western languages like Hindi and English, or a hybridisation of both.

A participant remarked:

“...those born after the ‘80s who have been exposed to other parts of India or foreign nations has adapted to a trend that they think is cool to make their children converse in English or Hindi...”

### ***4.2 The Memes as Modern and Modified Myths***

Most prominently evinced in digital folklore, 56.2% of interviewees indicated that they frequently (very often) see Meeteilon in memes, reels or YouTube content, and 48.9% thought that such humour plays a role in keeping the language alive. To this end, Meeteilon memes can be likened to meme games as defined by SeiffertBrockmann, Diehl, and Dobusch (2018), in which formats are always mixed up as a part of the dynamic digital discourse. The words of slang or meme formats are remixed and disseminated in Instagram,

WhatsApp, or Facebook. Certain memes, captions or Meeteilon slang are known only by youths in Imphal as an insider cultural language. Slangs/memes convey identity, humour, resistance, or belonging; they narrate about culture, social life and these are similar to old folktales.

The participants have mentioned that they have made memes which blend Meiteilon phrases with English expressions that are trending like, [Tuition lakningba mee leiradi Dm toubirko (if anyone wants to come to tuition, Dm me)]. Most young people tend to code-mix such as [action yengbiyu (watch the action)] and this is the playful bargaining between local and global identities. Other participants reinterpret classic Meeteilon sayings into funny postings on social media, such as [maphee komba (inappropriate clothing)], [Naaba (cultural slang dedicated among close pals)], [waikhu culture (traditional evolving identity of the Meetei people in Manipur)], [lamchat ludaba (unchaste living)] and cultural heritage becomes applicable in the online context.

One of the respondents made the following statements: Memes and humour specific to our culture keep Meeteilon alive they make us laugh, and they remind us of who we are as well. Another one indicated: Digital spaces are breaking and healing Meeteilon simultaneously. The way we, the people, will use the language will determine the state of the language. An impressive comment made by one of the respondents was, “It is the 21st century, we are modernising and westernising in the worst way possible. The other cultures that are imitated result in loss of local heritage, traditions, local language and dialects. I would term it as a Blind fashion. On the positive side, there are some influencers who are advertising the language via the digital platform.”

Examples of such inside jokes demonstrate that memes can actually be used as means of contested cultural capital, which is accessible and can be shared by those with certain cultural or subcultural knowledge (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). Some of the respondents also remarked that new digital slang is the re-invention of the older Meeteilon idioms and 90s film lines, which demonstrate that reinventing is remembering. These trends resonate with the larger trends that internet memes as cultural scripts serve to create and bargain the collective identity among online groups (Gal, Shifman, and Kampf, 2016).

### ***4.3 Hybridity, Code-Mixing, and Multilingual folklore***

The survey established that 59.6 per cent do not attempt to change language to a different one on the Internet, and they are deeply rooted to their culture. However, 50.6 percent mix Meeteilon with English and Hindi, which demonstrates that hybridisation is necessary under various circumstances and situations and is indicative of a more hybrid linguistic usage and production.

As one participant remarked:

“I decide to comment in Meeteilon or English based on a few factors. Primarily, it is the language in which the post is written or the language preference of the audience. The context of the conversation also plays a role, if it is casual or personal exchange with someone who uses Meeteilon i’d lean toward that language, while professional or formal contexts might prompt me to use English.”

Another said:

“I sometimes use English because my non-Manipuri friends don’t understand Meeteilon, but with my own people, I prefer it, it feels fake to use English among us.”

An interesting remark was:

“If it is something serious or the idea cannot be fully captured in Meeteilon, especially in online debates or discussions on current ideas and conditions of our state, etc. Although I am aware that Meeteilon will give a better reach but still some ideas are still better expressed in English.”

This is selective and conditional switching, which demonstrates urgency and not language loss. Situational bilingualism and multilingualism in the digital world Speakers actively change the language use according to the audience, platform, and purpose, which is indicative of situational bilingualism and multilingualism. Some of the respondents also said that posting or creating them enhances peer relationships and indicates being a part of the urban youth culture, with phrases like, hello mayam (hello everyone), support toubiyu(support please), please like and subscribe, ahaanbagi chakhomsidi mayamda enjarkAge(the first mouthful of rice is for the viewers), ei lost oire(I am lost), block touba(blocking someone), MA pass tourklabi(Somebody who has postgraduated), akhoi daddy(our daddy), Mukbang touba(Doing Mukbang), blog namba(shooting blogs), Aesthetic reels semba(Making aesthetic reels). This pattern supports findings that intercultural competence in multilingual settings often grows through strategic code-mixing and flexible language choice (Sharma, 2020). This trend promotes the results that intercultural competence in multilingual contexts tends to expand through a planned code-mixing procedure and adaptable linguistic restructuring.

#### ***4.4 Hybridity Emotional Identity and Linguistic Comfort***

Language online is not just communication or connection; it is identity and cultural performance. A majority of 69% expectedly, said they feel most comfortable expressing themselves in Meeteilon, English and Hindi, while 21.8% prefer only Meeteilon. A small 9.1% felt that using Meeteilon online makes them appear “less modern,” revealing the illusion of appearing less civilised and modern hierarchies between global and local languages. Nevertheless, 16.1% met people being teased or mocked for using pure Meeteilon, signifying modernism at the cost of cultural and identity loss faintly.

Despite this, the emotional connection to Meeteilon is still profound. Respondents expressed “pride,” “belonging,” “comfort”, “familiarity” and “warmth” when communicating in their mother tongue. Few excerpts from the survey are:

“Meeteilon will always be alive. Mixing of languages is natural, every language that exists now is not in its true form, that’s the beauty of language.”

“...less afraid to make mistakes in it.”

“Meeteilon will be alive with or without the support of digital spaces”

“Meeteilon is the defacto language of all various ethnicities living in Manipur while communicating with each other...”

Such affective attachment aligns with Anderson’s (1983) idea of “imagined communities,” where shared linguistic feeling reinforces belonging even across diasporic or digital boundaries.

#### ***4.5 Digital Barriers and Technological Needs***

78.2% of the respondents said they would use Meeteilon more if better keyboard, input system and

autocorrect features were available. A large group of 85.1% reported that they would use Meeteilon more online if it were widely accepted in professional and global digital spaces. This signals an infrastructural challenge in the digital driven world, the digital exclusion of smaller languages due to inadequate technological support and awareness in the global internet hub. Still, a substantial number of 60.7% recorded that Meeteilon isn't harder to type on a smartphone as compared to Hindi/English, despite the lack of features and tools.

Participants explained:

“I would work on creating comprehensive Meeteilon language resources and tools such as a user-friendly online dictionary, grammar guides, and translation software. These would make it easier for people to use and promote Meeteilon across digital platforms ensuring it stays relevant and accessible in the digital age.”

“Once Meeteilon has strong digital tools, people can comfortably use it online without switching to other dominant languages. It empowers daily use, content creation in the native language and learning which is key to survival.”

“The language needs to adapt, reinvent, reorganise and start accommodating other vowels, letters and words like the English language to always find a way to express any form of expression through it by not limiting itself through inadequacy of vowels, letters and words.”

This clearly points out global concerns about “linguistic digital inequality,” where dominant languages enjoy algorithmic privilege while minority one's struggle for basic visibility and inclusion.

#### ***4.6 Language, Pop Culture, and the Pressures of Modernity***

Respondents named the main causes of Meeteilon's decline as the preference for English in education and employment (44.9%), followed by the influence of Hindi and English in pop culture (20.2%), inadequate awareness and knowledge of the language (18%) and social pressure to use English/Hindi (9%).

Simultaneously, a large 95.5% believed that Manipuri influencers and celebrities should promote Meeteilon in their digital content. This reveals an emerging awareness that representation in digital pop culture, films, reels, blogs is key to sustaining linguistic pride and preservation.

37.1% of the respondents recorded that modernism is required and Meeteilon should adapt to digital culture by including more Internet slangs, abbreviations, and English words(hybridisation), to perform better in the digital stage and get the due recognition.

Some respondents remarked:

“The world needs to know that we exist, and we have our own story, language, and heritage. It is time to show everyone who we are.”

“...I laugh a lot watching those Manipuri reels, but honestly there is not much to learn. The reason the language is still alive on these platforms. It is mostly the algorithm keeping viewers hooked.”

“I have got comfortable with using only Meeteilon. It depends on the platform too, Facebook feels more laid back and chill where everyone shares funny, dumb stuffs, on Instagram it feels out of place to use Meeteilon.”

“Meeteilon feels more genuine, grounded and real to me. Sometimes regular words in English do not

fully capture what I am feeling. My own language helps me connect with my emotions better.”

These perspectives reframe digital participation not as imitation of global culture but as a claim to cultural sovereignty and identity in the global stage. This aligns with Mihailidis' (2020) argument that memes and hashtags carry civic and cultural potential in the everyday lives of young people, shaping how they see themselves and their communities.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of the present study prove that the future of digital in Meeteilon is decided by the complex of cultural pride, technological constraints, and the evolving linguistic habits of younger speakers. Though 42 per cent of the interviewees expressed concerns that the younger generation may forget the use of Meeteilon in the Internet due to the phenomenon of modernisation and globalisation in digital trends, there are a significant number of interviewees who expressed optimism concerning the language. As a demonstration, 80.9 percent answered in the affirmative to the concept of making Meeteilon a part of school-based digital literacy programs, 76.4 percent of them said they would become staunch believers in the further creation of more online materials in the language, and 71.9 percent of them thought Meeteilon had to be made an official language on government web sites and other Internet sites. The implication of such reactions is that continuity of Meeteilon will not only be a factor of nostalgia, but also a factor of how it will be re-invented strategically in the digital areas because of the improved technological foundation and community intervention. Recent scholarship also demonstrates that memes may mediate the relationship between the youth and cultural memory and institutions, making digital artefacts informal places of remembrance (Oswald, Esborg, and Pierroux, 2023).

The most frequent ideas of the participants are practical solutions such as artificial intelligence translators and deep web online dictionaries and grammar, straightforward keyboards that predict the text written by the users. They also observed the need to continue the use of Meeteilon in state affairs, more and more involvement of the digital creators who will be capable of providing the right translations and educational campaigns that will bring the young learners more knowledge about the history and the cultural significance of the language. Furthermore, the interviewees also highlighted the necessity to create effective digital platforms that would host the Meeteilon content, encourage qualified speakers to act out the application of the language on the internet and officially recognise the language in the other service domains of government. Collectively, the above suggestions suggest that the Meeteilon will have to be vigorously rejuvenated, technologically enhanced, and with long-term commitment to development of a sense of language pride among the generations to survive and prosper in the digital era.

## **Acknowledgment**

The author sincerely expresses her gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and constructive feedback, which significantly contributed to improving the quality and clarity of this paper.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or non-profit sectors. All ethical standards in conducting educational research were duly followed.

## Declaration

The author declares no part of this manuscript involves plagiarism or fabrication of data, and all ethical guidelines for educational research have been strictly adhered to during the conduct of the study. AI tools, if used, were solely for language refinement, grammatical clarity and formatting assistance. No AI tool was used for generating the core ideas, analysis, interpretations, or findings of the research.

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