'Unbelievable': Perspectives on The Digital World in Manang

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Perspectives on The Digital World in Manang
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Introduction and Abstract

About the Author
I’m Alex, a twenty-year-old college student from Boston, who one a year ago, decided to travel to Nepal for a semester abroad. It was an attempt to take a personal hiatus from the world of computers and technology - the focus of my studies in college. After completing this paper about technology, internet, and change in Manang, I realized I did the opposite! Before leaving the US, I explained to my friends and family that I wanted to try my hand in an academic sphere undefined by binaries (ie, not computer science). At this, I succeeded. While computers are indeed built on a foundation of ones and zeros, there is nothing binary about our interactions with them. If computers are defined by binary logic (if true, do this, if false, do that), then we are defined by our contradictions. Human truth lies in the in-between. We are fleshy sacks of paradoxes, and it’s beautiful.

Abstract
Manang lies one hundred miles northwest of Kathmandu in a valley called Nyeshang. Until a major road was constructed in 2014, the challenge of importing goods in and out of the town slowed the development of digital infrastructures supporting internet use. Consequently, the widespread use of the internet and digital communication is a relatively new phenomenon. Already, its effects are visible in classrooms, health clinics, hotels, and social structures. This paper investigates how Manangis learn about themselves, each other, and the world outside the valley in this new digital space. Emphasis is not placed on quantifications, but rather on the emotional reality of how change is perceived. ’What feels the same? What feels different?’
Methodology

The bulk of the data in this paper derives from eight informal interviews - five adults in the hotel industry, one school principal, a doctor, and a retiree who maintains a monastery - as well as from general observations I made while socializing with a group of young Manangis in their twenties. For each interview, I had an intention in mind, but I allowed room for the participants to guide my questions toward what felt pertinent to them. There are pros and cons to this style of informal, in-depth interviewing. It helped in gathering emotional insights into the changes, or lack thereof, felt by individuals in Manang. It also revealed topics of discussion I would not have known to invest time into. This allowed me to construct a narrative that centered around personal stories with the internet, as opposed to a quantitative assessment of its impact on life in Manang.

There are serious limitations to conducting research this way. Informal interviewing leaves much to the extrapolation of the author, whose biases influence which topics to further question, which answers to write about, and what to make of them. Though I tried to keep participants’ answers within their own personal context, there are times where they are written to represent group phenomena. When that is the case, I attempt to back up claims of an individual’s experience representing something larger than them with existing research. The time-consuming nature of in-depth interviews barred me from collecting data from a large sample size, which limits the scientific credibility of this paper. That said, this was less of an attempt at science, and more of an attempt at storytelling.
Digital Communication Part I: The Keeper of the Gompa

A digital ringtone echoed off the painted walls of Butsok Gompa¹, resonating through Mr. Phuntsok’s fleece pocket like the sounding horn of change. *Comedic timing*, I thought. Moments before, the octogenarian told me he knew nothing about technology and therefore couldn’t possibly be a good candidate to interview for a project about the internet.

“All the better,” I responded.

Earlier, Karma, Emerson,² and I huffed our way up the dusty path to the monastery to speak to the elderly folk who reside there to meditate and accumulate merit. I wanted to hear a

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¹ “Gompa” meaning monastery

² Emerson is a fellow SIT student, from whom I may have stolen the opportunity to interview Mr. Phuntsok that day. Karma is our age, and he grew up between Manang and Kathmandu. He was mostly helping Emerson conduct research, but helped with translation for me twice. This was one of those translated interviews.
perspective on technology and the internet from someone who lives relatively unaffected by it. Mr. Phuntsok’s phone conversation was brief. It was his daughter, who lives in the next village over, requesting a small loan to purchase butter lamps for ritual practice. Mr. Phuntsok may not be a technology expert, but he knew how to operate a cell phone.

Butsok Monastery rests atop a khaki-hued hill, extending like a camel’s hump from the foothills of Chulu East. The complex lies a hundred feet above the Marshyangdi River, with a clear view of Manang Village to the West. Far from the sonic backdrop of Manang village: the puttering motorcycles, grunting yaks, and ringing of cowbells, the only sounds that penetrate the thin air at the top of the hill are the flapping of prayer flags and the rustling leaves of century-old “Lhu” trees that line the path to the Gompa. The monk quarters are now empty, but across from it is a home for retirees seeking to attain peace and spiritual connectedness in their later years. As we approached their living quarters, we found Mr. Phuntsok resting on a wooden stool, twirling prayer beads with weathered fingers, and humming a mantra. He wore an olive puffy vest over a checkered flannel, with thin tinted prescription glasses that slightly obscured his deep-set, wrinkled eyes. Karma spoke to him in Manangi for a moment, after which he stood up with age-defying speed to lead us to the prayer hall, just a short walk away. There, Mr. Phuntsok recalled eight decades of change in Manang village.

“There used to be a village up here, with thirteen or fourteen homes. That’s where my parents lived, and where I was born, but over time, the inhabitants died off, or moved to Kathmandu. When no one was left, the land was handed over to a lama, who turned this place into a residence where Nyeshangba could live and eat for free. I live here now and maintain the Gompa. I wake up at four in the morning to meditate and perform puja, and I keep busy by cleaning the grounds and praying.”

This explains the number of dilapidated stone structures behind the Monastery. As locals migrated to Kathmandu in the mid-twentieth century, and as Manangis began to rely less on

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3 Pema Phuntsok, Butsok Gompa, Manang, November 13, 2023
agropastoralism to feed themselves, the farming villages on the fringe hills of Manang proper were the first to be abandoned. When I asked him about the “old days” in the valley, he spoke of a time before using soap was commonplace in Manang, buckwheat flour, he insisted, worked just fine as a cleaning agent.

“… We didn’t have much time to wash our bodies and faces anyway those days. Back then, we just worked, from dawn till dusk. Free time is something the teenagers today have. Not then. It was very hard work. Before, when there was no phone, the only thing we could do was walk to the next village, or take a horse if it was too far to walk, in order to give notice or share news. If someone died in Khangsar or Pisang, no one would know in Manang unless someone physically came to share the news. If a new law was approved, the head council members would sometimes call on me to ride my horse to the next villages to announce the change.”

Mr. Phuntsok explained that one needed to muster enough volume for the whole village to hear. He mimicked shouting on horseback, hands cupped around his mouth. “Hello! Hello!”

“…There’s no need for that anymore. Myself, I have six daughters and one son - one of my daughters lives in Belgium, one in Cyprus, and my son lives in India. The fact that I can talk to my children abroad, and learn everything about their lives and hear news from different countries, it makes me a happy grandfather. We don’t have Wi-FI up here, so I can’t see their faces, but their voices are enough.”

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5 Pema Phuntsok, Butsok Gompa, Manang, November 13, 2023
6 Ibid
Before digital communication reached Manang, long-distance messages were best sent in letter form. During this period, the only way in and out of Manang was via a trekking trail, and letters took around a month to reach their recipient. If one wanted to quickly spread news to another village in the valley, they’d better own a horse. In the 90’s, a VSAT telephone revolutionized communication in and out of the valley. For the first time, Manangis could talk in real time with anyone, anywhere that had a phone line on the other end. Still, communication was difficult. Long lines to use the telephone and a cost barrier of 12-15 rupees per minute kept conversations infrequent and brief. Some years later, a telephone tower was built, allowing those able to afford CDMA telephones to make calls. Unlike a VSAT system, CDMA can split its bandwidth, channeling multiple calls in the same signal. Consequently, the lines for the VSAT telephone got shorter. When cell phones grew more popular, the two largest telecom companies in Nepal erected 2g and 3g towers in Manang, to provide Manangis and trekkers with relatively inexpensive cell service.

**Digital Communication Part II: Ongma Tsering, Dr. Shashank, and Sonam Gurung**

I sat in the cozy, pine-boarded dining hall of Hotel Mountain Lake, nursing a cup of sweet black tea as Tsering Ongma (49) recalled memories of the Manang she spent the first eight years of her life and the one she returned to at age twenty-six. I was hoping she could help me understand how new technologies affected the means of communication in and out of Manang. The images she drew up from her childhood were hazy and random; asking for biscuits and crying when she

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7 Ananda Raj Ghimire, Shree Annapurna Secondary School, Manang, November 19, 2023
8 Pema Phuntsok, Butsok Gompa, Manang, November 13, 2023
9 Ananda Raj Ghimire, Shree Annapurna Secondary School, Manang, November 19, 2023
10 Ongma Tsering, Mountain Lake Hotel, Manang, November 14, 2023
11 Ibid
12 Ananda Raj Ghimire, Shree Annapurna Secondary School, Manang, November 19, 2023
13 Binod Gurung, Hotel Yeti, Manang, November 15, 2023
couldn’t have any, the woody aroma of pinesap candles, which predated the electric lights she found upon returning to the valley. When she was eight, she left Manang with her parents to attend school in Kathmandu. After meeting her husband, and having her first child, the two made a life-changing decision to return to Manang. It was difficult, she remembered, but necessary.

“I wouldn’t say my parents were extremely excited about me returning to Manang, but in our society, we try to sacrifice our feelings and all. Tashi and I were married at this time, and we had to run his family’s hotel in Manang, so just I took this as part of the adventure of my life.”

Electrical and communicative infrastructure was in its early development when she returned. The Annapurna Road, for example, wouldn’t be constructed for 14 years. There was an airstrip in the nearby village of Humde, but when a storm grounded Ognma and Tashi’s flight in Pokhara, they were forced to take the trekking road. The new Manang they encountered had electric lights, but they were few and far between. Upon arrival, the only way she could communicate with her parents was a single VSAT telephone.

“After taking the bus from Pokhara to Besisahar, it took us five days to reach Manang. There was no jeep back then, no nothing, and Tashi and I took turns carrying our two month old daughter. At first, when I got here, I was a bit uneasy, thinking ‘how will this

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14 Ongma Tsering, Mountain Lake Hotel, Manang, November 14 2023
15 Ibid
all be?’ but I just convinced myself ‘this is the reality now.’ I’d say my parents were more worried about me than I was. We called each other once or twice a week. Back then, 23 years ago, there was one VSAT telephone, which cost 15 rupees per minute, so our conversations were brief, maybe five minutes. We had to talk very fast!”

While speaking with Ogmna, it became apparent that the medium through which she communicated with her family shaped the structure and content of their conversations. The expensive VSAT phone calls underlined her early talks with her parents with a sense of urgency. They would talk about Ogmna’s safety and the success of the hotel business, but not much else. Ogmna now uses WhatsApp to talk with her two daughters, who are pursuing higher education in the US. While those chats tend to be relatively brief, some extend to an hour long. WhatsApp is financially and temporally far more efficient than the old VSAT phone, which allows them to go beyond the essentials to a realm of comfortable, prolonged conversation. For her daughters, who are in different phases of adjusting to a new culture, these longer conversations allow for more detailed and intimate discussions of how they’re feeling - a luxury Ogmna didn’t have during her re-acclimation to life in Manang. As we spoke, I thought of another conversation I had with a young doctor at the nearby volunteer clinic, who also uses WhatsApp to talk with his family.

I visited the Himalayan Rescue Aid Post on a Monday in hopes of speaking with a professional about the internet’s impact on health care in Manang. The day before, I walked into the clinic’s courtyard and found five or six middle-aged men, mostly white and in their 50s, chatting around a blue picnic table. I asked if there was a doctor I could speak to.

“Mate, we’re all doctors.”

A touch embarrassed, I asked if any of them were willing to spare fifteen minutes for an interview. They all exchanged glances, their body language expressing a clear message; ‘erm, 

16 Ibid
you wanna take this?” After a brief eternity, they told me I should talk to the Nepali doctor in-house, who “was better at interviews than us.” A senior doctor motioned him outside.

His name was Shashank. He seemed young, lively, and perfect to speak to about the internet and healthcare, but he asked me to return the next day and to keep the interview brief. Our conversation was centered around health care, but I asked towards the end how the internet affects communication with his friends and relatives; I noticed he was wrapping up a WhatsApp video chat with his mother when I arrived.

“I think the internet and cellphones have brought a huge change in the behavior of people. When I was a kid, I trekked in Muktinath. We started in a place called Bene, and we had to walk most of the ways during that time. I was ten years old, and my parents were not very worried about me. I was gone for several days and contacted my parents only once or twice, and there was no problem with that back then. Now, even if I miss
contacting them in a day, they get worried. So, I think cellphones have brought people a lot closer, but the behavior is different.”\textsuperscript{17}

For Dr. Shashank, the ability to speak frequently with his parents from afar brings with it a dependence on daily communication. It’s an interesting paradox. When he was trekking off the grid as a child, his parents, as far as he knew, spent less time thinking about his safety and wellbeing. Now being reachable at all times creates a new source of anxiety for them. Since he is able to call them all the time, his parents believe something must be wrong if he doesn’t check in every day.

**Social Media: An Introduction**

If you, dear reader, ever decide to research the internet and change in Manang, or anywhere in the world for that matter, I have a special challenge for you; Conduct a whole interview without mentioning social media. It just won’t happen.

When wireless internet became widely accessible in Manang, about eight or nine years ago, social media began to introduce new means of acquiring knowledge and communicating with the outside world. Some believe social media is responsible for a decline in Manangi identity. Others see it as a tool to maintain tradition. In this section, I’ll try to focus on the perspectives of individuals, rather than make blanket statements, about what it’s like to interact with and through social media in Manang.

The 2g cell service in Manang is only able to support the use of social media platforms during the winter, when tourism is at its minimum and many Manangis migrate to Kathmandu.\textsuperscript{18} This may be a good place, then, to discuss the development of Wi-Fi access in Manang.

\textsuperscript{17}Shashank Timilsina MD., Himalayan Aid Post, Manang, November 20 2023

\textsuperscript{18}Tashi R. Ghale, Mountain Lake Hotel, Manang, November 16 2023
In 2004, a large satellite dish installed on the roof of Thorongla Hotel signaled the beginning of internet connectivity in Manang. The Thorongla cafe became an internet cafe, and for the first time, Manangis and tourists were able to browse the web, and send, and receive emails - albeit at 1200 rupees per hour. Some years later, a company called STM installed more dishes in the surrounding hotels, and in 2014, a local internet provider called PDS set up the first Wi-Fi routers in hotels and homes alike. The system was entirely solar-powered, so as long as homes and hotels had means of generating in-house power, Wi-Fi access was relatively stable. Snow was a problem, though. An accumulation of snow atop the high altitude panels which powered PDS internet caused the network to go out during the winter months. This was resolved three years later, when Techmind, a fiber-optic internet provider, came to town to install Wi-Fi routers in homes and hotels. The only events that can shut down the Techmind internet is a power outage, or a landslide severing the cable that connects Manang to the host company in Chitwan. In the hotel industry, stable Wi-Fi is crucial for keeping guests happy, so most hotels have both Techmind and PDS Wi-Fi now.

### On Social Media, Snow Leopards, and Tourism: Tashi Ghale

Tashi sat at his favorite spot in the corner of Hotel Mountain Lake’s dining room, camera at his side, zoned into sorting through photos from his most recent expedition to the mountains to check his camera traps for images of snow leopards.

“Successful trip?”

“The cameras captured snow leopards, so yeah, I am happy!.”

Mr. Tashi R. Ghale is an awarded snow leopard photographer and conservationist, who somehow finds the time to run operations at Hotel Mountain Lake with his wife and partner in adventure, Tsering Ongma. On Facebook, Tashi has 10,000 followers, for whom he posts one photo a day. I met with him to learn about the role of social media in expanding his reach as a photographer. Tashi needed two minutes to finish up organizing the shots, so in the meantime, I set up shop in a

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19 Binod Gurung, Hotel Yeti, Manang, November 15 2023

20 Ibid
solar-heated ‘sun room,’ in the back of the dining hall. I sat in a cushioned wicker chair and peered up at the framed snow leopard prints Tashi is famous for. A snow leopard stared at me from across the room with electric yellow eyes, clutching a boulder below with paws like baseball gloves, its tubular tail curling around a snowcapped stone mass. I examined the image, wondering how Tashi caught its attention. Maybe it’s simply impossible to enter a snow leopard’s presence unperceived. Mid-thought, Tashi entered the room, and I asked him if any of his photos ever went viral.

“Oh yes. I set up a camera up the valley on the way to Khangsar where there is a suspension bridge, so it caught a snow leopard crossing the bridge, and that footage got viral. Like, multiple thousand people have seen that.”

“Has going viral like that changed your career?”

(The snow leopard photo - taken by Tashi R. Ghale)
“I wouldn’t say my career has changed, but people see the photos and want to come to Manang to see the snow leopards. So many people that we started leading snow leopard expeditions for tourists and trekkers. Back before social media, there were very less photographs of snow leopards.” He pointed at two photos on the wall. “I took these in 2006. At that time, in Nepal, only three Westerners and two Nepali had taken photos of snow leopards. Now, thousands of people have captured them. A lot of that is social media.”

As a platform for promoting Tashi’s wildlife photography and conservation agenda, social media increases his visibility to nature enthusiasts everywhere. “When I post, the world sees it,” he later remarked. As Tashi noted, some amateur photographers, who see snow leopards on their Instagram feeds, go as far as visiting places like Manang to claim a piece of the proverbial snow leopard pie. This leads to a rise in the number of people who want to capture images of snow leopards, which presents a business opportunity for people like Mr. Ghale, who know where to look. While Tashi doesn’t view internet virality as a career changing force, he does give credit to the internet’s role in promoting the cause of ecological restoration on a world stage. To Tashi, it’s not about success or fame. It’s about the snow leopards. He would set out to photograph them if there was an audience or not.

Before this interview, I hypothesized that the internet would make Tashi’s photography career possible, if not profitable. It was surprising to hear him say that virality has not affected much. Perhaps his response was in the context of that specific video of the snow leopard on the suspension bridge. That would make sense, but maybe, his response reflected the dissonance between our internal perception and our lived reality - that of the internet, and its influence on our lives.

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21 Tashi R. Ghale, Mountain Lake Hotel, Manang, November 16 2023

22 Snow leopard pie is used purely in the figurative sense. Feeding tourists snow leopards would probably be a conflict of interest for conservationists.

23 Tashi R. Ghale, Mountain Lake Hotel, Manang, November 16 2023
Social Media and Tourism Continued: Binod Gurung

I clasped my hands around a mug of *chu tsapo*24 inside the wide-windowed staff and porter lounge at Hotel Yeti, as Binod Gurung, a Nyeshangba tourism entrepreneur in his early fifties, shared his perspective on changes in the wake of internet access. Two days prior, Karma informed me that Binod Gurung was one of the most tech-savvy businessmen in Manang, and the first person to write, sing, and publish songs in the Manangi language on YouTube.25 I wanted to hear his perspective on technological and economic change in Manang. It wasn’t difficult to get in touch with him, as I was living in his hotel. That morning, Mr. Gurung donned a pair of black leather pants, a red Nike varsity jacket, a pine green baseball cap, and a pair of dark, thin-framed sunglasses, an outfit that stood out against the muted puffer jackets and blue jeans comprising much of the Manangi style-book. He spoke in paragraphs, explaining the series

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24 Chu tsapo meaning hot water in Tibetan

25 Karma Gurung, Manang, November 2023
of events that led to his founding of Hotel Yeti, and his recent adoption of ChatGPT, starting in the 1960’s with the visitation of King Mahendra to Braga. At one point in our conversation, we were talking about domestic tourists and social media.

Nyeshang Valley is newly accessible via jeeps and motorcycles, thanks to a road completed in 2014. According to Binod Gurung, domestic tourists, who would not have trekked to Manang in the past, are now visiting in unprecedented numbers. This past October, he claims, 80% of the tourists in Manang were Nepali. “It was unbelievable,” he recounted. Binod explained that the dramatic shift in tourist demographics cannot be solely attributed to the road. Social media played a major role in turning Manang into a popular tourist destination.

“There was a movie shot at Tilicho Lake with a very famous Nepali actor. (Footnote about my friend Tenzin’s dad playing the stunt double) It was a very big hit, and there was one song that was filmed at Tilicho Lake. It gained a lot of popularity from that. Then people came, and they starting posting pictures, videos, and TikToks on social media. Now, sometimes at Tilitcho base camp, there are so many people that they have to sleep in the kitchen! This is all because of social media.”

The movie shot at Tilicho lake catalyzed the growth in domestic awareness of Manang’s scenic beauty. Social media, then, propelled domestic tourism in Manang into the stratosphere. His claim that around 80% of tourists this past October were Nepali marks a profound shift in tourism development in Manang. A study of social media’s impact on domestic rural tourism in India found that the majority of those surveyed felt that social media played a large role in “deciding and finalizing their travel plans.” Over two thirds responded that websites and social media apps are their primary means of deciding where to go as well as where to stay in their

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26 Willem Van Spengen, “Beyond Annapurna, or How to Interpret Success in Himalayan Trade,” Himalaya Volume 33, Numbers 1 & 2, 2013: 90

27 Binod Gurung, Hotel Yeti, Manang, November 15 2023
chosen destination. While this study was conducted in India, these findings ring true in Binod’s experience. He told me that social media is a much faster and cheaper method of generating awareness of Manang and Hotel Yeti than the old strategy - paying for travel writers to visit Manang, take photos, and place them in the Nepali newspapers.

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Cultural Identity and the Internet: Ne Festival, YouTube, and the Nyeshangpa Language

My visit to Manang overlapped with the three day celebration of Ne festival, during which men saddle up on horseback to chase malevolent spirits out of the village. This year, a major controversy stunted the tradition. On the first day, a group of adults in the village wrote a petition in protest of the law of mandatory participation in the festival. The horse ceremony was postponed, and that day, there were only eight riders - mostly Karma and his friends, who are all under the age of 25. Karma and his buddies feared that Ne this year would be the last in Manangi history. In Ne, older community members play a crucial role in demonstrating intricacies of the performance, as well as the lyrics and choreography of dances and songs. Karma saw these as integral to the celebration. “The first day, we didn’t know the rhythm of the song, so we just kinda guessed. It was a little sad.”

Despite the setbacks, the boys rode with fury and poise.

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29 Karma Gurung, Manang, November 2023
The older folk’s lack of participation complicated a common narrative presented by elders like Mr. Phuntsok, who told me, “Nowadays the younger generation is following the cultures of other places. They are not trying to preserve and conserve our culture.”

He said that social media, and the amount of time kids spend on their phones, were among the forces driving the loss of Manangi identity. While conducting field work in Manang, I did not witness any blatant examples of social media impeding the continuation of tradition. Yes, Karma’s friends wear different clothing than their grandparent’s generation at their age. They also tend only to speak in Manangi with their family while using Nepali with each other. I would argue, however, that these changes are caused more by time spent in Kathmandu, than time spent on their cell phones. Further complicating the position that social media drives cultural loss, is Binod Gurung’s use of YouTube to help preserve Manangi language.

Like Ognma Tsering, Binod Gurung felt unsettled upon his return to Manang from Kathmandu in the late 90’s. “When I came back to build this hotel in 1998, I felt like everything had become modern, and that people are changing. I was so scared that maybe one day our Manangi culture, customs and language would be lost.” He began to think of ways he could help pass the culture onto future generations. In Manang, all of the traditional songs handed down from older generations derive from Tibet, and are thus sung in Tibetan. Binod saw this as an opportunity to do something unprecedented in Manangi culture.

“I started thinking about preserving the language, and when I saw the youth groups here I thought, you know, song is a good way to connect with the language. We are Manangi, but all our songs belong to Tibet, so I wrote a song in the Manangi language which can be understood both by the youth and the old people, everybody. I eventually made an album with eight songs, and a few of them I shot here, in music videos on YouTube, to promote Manang. I was the first Manangi person to sing a song in Manangi language. And soon after that, my friends also produced songs in our language. Now, we have more than

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30 Pema Phuntsok, Butsok Gompa, Manang, November 13 2023

31 Binod Gurung, Hotel Yeti, Manang, November 15 2023
twenty in our own language. So, before, we’d see our grandfathers dance to songs that we
don’t understand. I thought, if we made these modern songs with the modern music, the
youth can pick up the song and from the song learn Manangi language and preserve it.
The young people all sing the songs now.”32

Binod distributed these songs in a booklet to all the young people he could. By posting the songs
to YouTube in music video form, however, his reach expanded to a much wider audience. The
most popular video on his YouTube page, titled “Pyaro Manang (first song vocal by all
nyeshangten singer),”33 has nearly thirty thousand views. Karma and his friends know it well.34
Here is an example of a social media platform acting as a space where the Manangi language can
live and breathe. That social media can be additive in the maintenance of Manangi, or the
upholding of traditions, seems to rest on how the user interacts with it.

32 Ibid
33 Dawa Gurung, Binod Gurung, “Pyaro Manang (first song vocal by all nyeshangten singer),” YouTube
video, 6:31, Jan 18, 2013
34 Karma Gurung, Manang, November 2023
The Internet and Health Care: A Doctor's Perspective

Dr. Shashank and his surrounding team of doctors, harness the internet as a tool to provide better healthcare for patients. During his two-month tenure, in Manang he says a WhatsApp group chat helped save a patient’s life.

“The internet sure helps. There was this one girl that came in with a very rare case of something called ‘bigeminic pulse.’ Her heart was beating very irregularly, and it was a new case for all of us, an incidental finding, and we weren’t sure what to do with her. We had to text our team back in Kathmandu, who had experienced many of these cases that year. They were pretty confident about the proper procedure, which in turn gave us good confidence about handling that case. She’s okay now, but we wouldn’t have been sure what to do without the support from our WhatsApp group chat with our Kathmandu team.”

In providing patients with emergency treatment, communicative efficiency is crucial. It’s hard to say what might have become of this patient if the doctors in Manang were unable to communicate with their team in Kathmandu, but the second opinion gave Dr. Shashank and his team a level of confidence to execute the correct procedure they would not have had otherwise. After every case, he says, the doctors in Manang text an update to the Kathmandu team to discuss any unusual findings, and helpful procedures in dealing with the case. This keeps a written log so that if any patients in the future come in with similar cases, the doctors can reference what was done in the past.

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35 Shashank Timilsina MD., Himalayan Aid Post, Manang, November 20 2023
36 Ibid
The Internet and Education: Ananda Raj Ghimire on Social Media, Entertainment, and Google

When I first met Ananda Raj Ghimire, the sky was overcast, which was uncommon for a November day in Manang. He stood in the dusty center courtyard of Shree Annapurna Secondary School, waving to the children who were trickling into school after a holiday break in groups of two and three.

Mr. Ghimire (56) has been the principal of Shree Annapurna for 20 years. He speaks of his role with a soldier’s sense of duty, but his serious disposition coexists with a warm and accommodating energy. We spoke in his office. It was dark due to a power outage, but as my eyes adjusted, I made out some of the decorations on his wall. One poster featured illustrated warnings for children of everyday dangers; “Do not climb on window sills, as you may fall,” or “Stoves are hot. Do not touch!” There was a paper which read, in large Helvetica font, “The roots of knowledge are bitter, but the fruits are sweet.” When I pointed out an abalone fossil on the wall above his desk, he was happy to describe its origin, as much as he could through the language barrier. Mr. Ghimire cherished his opportunity to educate, and treated his role as one of servitude.

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37 Ananda Raj Ghimire, Shree Annapurna Secondary School, Manang, November 19 2023
I was curious to hear his take on the opportunities and complications technology presents in education. By and large, he maintained that “internet has made education much easier.” The use of audio-visuals as a teaching aid makes math more approachable, and the school’s new e-library of learning resources offers clarity to confused students. "They can watch videos, read, and gain knowledge,” he said. At its best, the internet gives agency to students seeking to brush up on subjects outside of school hours. At its worst, it is a distraction. “In our school, we don’t allow students to use internet for purposes outside of education. They bring their mobile phones, using them secretly for other purposes and waste their time. We have to change our Wi-Fi password often, because students keep finding it out.”

To young minds, entertainment ad infinitum is irresistible, and Mr. Ghimire wishes parents were more aware of the internet’s distractive potential. “Entertainment is important, but some guardians don’t have knowledge on mobile and internet, and they don’t know what their children are seeing and doing with it at home. They are also not concerned enough, due to which, their children are being distracted.”

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38 Ibid
39 Ibid
Artificial Intelligence and Pizza Parties: Binod’s Perspective on Education, Technology, and Change

Binod Gurung, too, believes the internet has improved education in Manang, by giving students a means of learning and clearing up confusion outside of the classroom. “If you’re confused, you can use Google. For students, it helps with learning English too. If they don’t know a word, they can look it up and also learn by watching videos.”

Google, as an educational resource, is not just being harnessed by children and teens in school. “Even myself, if I am confused, I just go google or chatGPT, and it helps solve the problem.”

Yes, chatGPT, the AI chatbot that exploded into the public sphere exactly a year before this interview was conducted, has established a presence in Manang. It helps Binod generate “good content” for Instagram and Facebook.

As one of the first adopters of the internet in Manang in 2014, and as a recent employer of chatGPT, Binod consistently stays on top of technological changes and trends. He spent his formative business years as a trader during a period of Manangi trading history defined by increasing competition, it’s possible his penchant for the cutting edge developed out of a necessity to outcompete. It’s just a theory, but Binod believes that his love for new technology is not out of the ordinary in Manang.

“Yes, I really like to learn, but it’s not only me. Everyone likes to use new technologies. A long time ago, people used to only eat tsampa, buckwheat porridge, and buckwheat bread. And now 84 year olds are celebrating their birthday with modern cake. What is

40 Binod Gurung, Hotel Yeti, Manang, November 15 2023

cake doing here!? Now, people eat toast with jam, they make pizza parties in their house. Even if they don’t have an oven, they use the steamer. It’s a huge change!”

“So you see the change from having no internet to using chatGPT and from eating buckwheat to pizza parties as kind of the same?”

“Exactly.”

Broadly, this speaks to a difficulty in distinguishing developments such as chatGPT, which are clearly related to the internet, from cultural changes, which at most seem peripheral to technology. It may be a stretch of the imagination to consider the adoption of pizza parties or birthday cakes as fitting within the category of technological change. That Binod feels this way, though, reveals that pizza parties, cake, and chatGPT exist in neighboring perceptive and emotional categories. Furthermore, while we tend to label pizza as less of a technology, and more of a food, social media platforms inspire Manangis to integrate elements of other cultures into their own. Perhaps such culinary adoptions are part of what Mr. Phuntsok meant when describing how ‘kids these days’ are “taking the culture of other places.”

While Binod told me about the pizza parties and birthday cakes, I wondered who exactly got to indulge in these potentially cost-prohibitive carby delights. Research on social media’s impact on rural cultural identities suggests that a greater income leads to a higher "ability of people to financially immerse themselves in technology and its applications.” Therefore, if we consider the examples Binod presented as all falling into the category of application of technology, we can assume one’s income in Manang impacts their ability to partake in such pizza pursuits.

42 Binod Gurung, Hotel Yeti, Manang, November 15 2023
43 Pema Phuntsok, Butsok Gompa, Manang, November 13 2023
44 M Radwan, “Effect of social media usage on the cultural identity of rural people: a case study of Bamha village, Egypt.” Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, volume 9, 2022: 11
The Digital Divide: Ananda Raj Ghimire

It’s not all pizza parties and cake. According to Principle Ghimire, when the Nepali government urged schools to go online during the COVID pandemic, the inability of low-income students to access devices and the internet made Zoom school impossible.

In Manang, high-income families, especially those with money from the trade and tourism economy, are likely to send their children to private schools in Kathmandu or Pokhara. Generally, if parents can’t afford to send their children to a city for education and/or need the extra hands to help with work, Shree Annapurna is the next best choice. It’s free to attend and near the village center. Karma informed me that many of those who attend Shree Annapurna Secondary School are the children of laborers. The economic inequality faced by a portion of Shree Annapurna’s students underlined my discussion with Principle Ghimire about Zoom school during COVID

“I couldn’t manage it” Mr. Ghimire recounted. “As school was closed due to lockdown, all the teachers and students were scattered. Beyond that, it’s not like all the students have devices and access to the internet. That’s why we couldn’t do online classes.” When we concluded our interview, Mr. Ghimire spoke again of the digital divide in Manang. He told me that, while technology and the internet are wonderful instruments for teaching students, there is a great inequality in who benefits from them the most. COVID made this clear.

45 Karma Gurung, Manang, November 19 2023
46 Karma Gurung, Manang, November 19 2023
47 Ananda Raj Ghimire, Shree Annapurna Secondary School, Manang, November 19 2023
A TikTok Romance

Pemba smiled when I asked if he met his long distance girlfriend in her home town of Chitwan.

“No, no, no, TikTok!”

We laughed, sitting across from each other at a sun-weathered picnic table in the tiled center courtyard of Hotel Mystic, a single-story cinderblock construction at the very east end of Manang. It was a rather warm day, with the sun shining directly overhead, and at this point in the interview, the high altitude glare, along with Pemba’s bombshell statement, compelled me to unzip my outer fleece. Emerson was to my left, pen and notebook in hand, taking notes and praying to no avail that I wouldn’t ask any embarrassing follow up questions.

I originally met Pemba Gurung to ask about his perspective on recent changes in youth culture and their potential relationship to internet access. A few minutes before I learned about his TikTok-enabled long distance relationship, he claimed changes were minimal. “It’s the same. It just depends on how you’re gonna look at it. But it’s the same, I’ve lived here for 17 years and it’s the same community - the same place.”

Right then, a cow swaggered into the courtyard in search of snacking greenery, and with the cadence of a stock broker receiving a business call, Pemba informed me he had to “deal with this.” After he shushed the poor thing outside, I asked what he himself primarily uses Wi-Fi for.

“No, no, no, TikTok!”

I asked what he himself primarily uses Wi-Fi for.

“Just to connect with friends, really. If I’m free and I see they’re online, I just talk. Otherwise I don’t use it much.”

“Do you text or video chat or…”?

“Video call only with my girlfriend, otherwise I don’t talk to many people.”

“Does Wi-Fi make it easier to do long distance?”

48 Pemba Gurung, Hotel Mystic, Manang, November 17 2023
“Well yeah, we can see each other. That’s the only thing keeping us together I think. She’s in Chitwan, and all I’m gonna say is if the internet is out here, she’s gonna be mad.”

That’s when I asked if they met in Chitwan, and he recounted their TikTok origin story. It all began on a January day in Kathmandu, where Pemba spends three months of the year. Without the busy schedule of running Hotel Mystic in Manang, and in the absence of the social routine he enjoys there, Pemba finds Kathmandu rather dull. There, he claims to spend much more time on the internet, scrolling through social media platforms and playing PUBG (‘pub-G’), a popular online battle royal game. That day, he was feeling especially bored.

“I had this one cousin, and he was talking to this girl on TikTok live, and so I went over there, and we just started talking, sharing different stories and all that, and later we started connecting and talking more and more, and now we’ve been in a relationship for almost a year. Our anniversary is coming up actually.”

“Are you nervous?” I asked, unsure if they’d met in person yet.

“No, not nervous. I’m thinking of getting married with her. My family knows about her, her family knows about me, so I’m not nervous.”

“Was it difficult explaining to your relatives that you met your future fiancé on TikTok?”

“They all laughed actually.”

When Pemba told me he met his girlfriend on TikTok, my reaction was similar to when Mr. Phuntsok’s phone rang at Butsok Gompa. Both events surprised me, after listening to each party say that they either didn’t have much experience with technology, or didn’t feel as though much was different. Pemba says his life in Manang remains relatively unaffected by the internet, but his relationship with his girlfriend, he feels, rests on whether his Wi-Fi router is working or not. When it goes out, it’s not just an inconvenience. It has real implications for his relationship’s wellbeing, and thus his own. Pemba and his girlfriend use WhatsApp to video chat with each other for around four hours per day. Most of the time he spends socializing is with her. Perhaps

49 Ibid
his surrounding world feels the same, but his personal life in Manang revolves around the internet, and it took some time to understand that these perceptions can feel equally true.

**Internet, Change, and Maturity**

I was hoping to gain Pemba’s insight on whether or not access to the internet disrupts the ways people socialize in Manang. During an earlier visit to Manang, I asked his brother, Sonam Gurung, if he longs to return to a pre-internet version of Manang, to which he responded “I wish we could... We used to play cards, go hiking, play music, horse riding, nowadays it’s all just memory... No friend circle, everything’s gone.” From Sonam’s perspective, internet access is largely responsible for the decline in face-to-face socialization among him and his friends. Social media platforms provide a rather convenient stand in for the activities he described partaking in. Consequently they hold the potential to replace them altogether, while the connective tissue keeping his friend group together atrophies. It’s a rather bleak image, which paints the internet in Manang as a malignant threat to socialization altogether, but Pemba claims something else is responsible for the decline in physical interaction Sonam experiences.

When I told Pemba about Sonam’s feeling that activities like singing, horse riding, etc are all “just memory,” and that the internet is accountable for this shift, he told me that there are more factors at play.

“That things used to be fun... but nowadays guys are getting mature - they’re not teenagers anymore. I’m starting a business and that’s my focus, so I can’t go out with my friends, sitting, singing, drinking alcohol and all those things we do in the free time... Most of the guys our ages are married too, and if they have families, they won’t go outside right now. So, it’s not just because of the internet, it’s because of maturity.”

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50 Sonam Gurung, Hotel Yeti, Manang, October 2023
51 Pemba Gurung, Hotel Mystic, Manang, November 17 2023
When I visited the “La La House,” the spot where Karma and his buddies tend to hang out, I was often met with a wall of heads pointed down at cellphones, the sound of submachine guns emanating at full volume from online shooter games. For this group of friends, TikToks and online games help fill the spare hours of their days, of which there are many at this point in their young adult lives. Still, there seems to be plenty of room of chatting, boozing, and all the other casual pastimes which Pemba says “used to be fun.” To Karma’s gang, the types of fun activities Sonam remembers can coexist the digital world he blames for a decline in socialization. Perhaps for Sonam, the positive memories he has with his buddies from his youth feel inextricable from the absence of technology and social media. Maybe when Karma’s friends grow up, they will remember this period of their lives with nostalgia - wishing they too could go back to the days when they had all the time in the world to laugh about shooting each other through their cell phones.

(Videogames at La La House vs. a night of singing during Dihar)
Conclusion: The Tourist, and a Perceptive Fish

I walked up the dark wood staircase to the top floor of Hotel Yeti and found that the door to the dining hall was locked. It wasn’t a shocking discovery - it usually wasn’t open that late anyway. The week before, I discovered that the dining hall Wi-Fi works well enough to make calls from the balcony outside. After that, it became something of a pre-bedtime routine to stand there and talk with my girlfriend and family via WhatsApp for an hour or so. These were phone calls, not video chats. The service was too weak for the latter. That day, Emerson and I made a Thanksgiving supper for ten of our new Manangi friends, with all the proper bells and whistles. I love to cook, and the meal prep was a good distraction from some stressful news I’d been ruminating on from the night prior; My Grandpa’s lungs were getting worse, fast. My dad called to let me know. “I don’t know if it’s going to be today, a week from now, or next year, but call him when you get the chance.” These were the words he used, ’It’ meaning the big, final, catastrophic ‘IT.’

So I called Granpa. My fingers were stiff as I typed in his contact. The phone rang. When he picked up, he was quick to ask if he could see my face. Despite knowing video chat never worked, I gave it a shot. Maybe because everyone was asleep, or maybe by the grace of some Thanksgiving deity, it worked. There we were. He noticed I was wearing the same grey hat and orange puffer as every one of our previous calls. I noticed he had an oxygen tube. The call was short. I said that Granny’s Mac and Cheese recipe was a hit, and that I knew he’d be ok. He told me he’ll always be at my side, that life will be full of beautiful adventures like this one, and that my nearing re-introduction into computer science will suck, but that he believes in me. We cried, savoring the moment with each other, knowing that it may be our last.52

When I woke up the next day, it hit me that this is what it means to have internet in Manang. While we talked, the edges of my phone screen blurred into the background, and he was, for all intents and purposes, there on the balcony with me. I forgot I was even holding a phone. If some

52 It wasn’t. My Granpa is feeling stronger now, and as I write this, I can’t wait to see him this Christmas!
me type person came along that night, asked to interview me, and led with “how do you feel the internet affects you in Manang,” I’d probably respond that bigger things are affecting me right now than the internet (ie. Granpa), taking wholly for granted that the internet is what enabled me to learn he was sick in the first place. Maybe it’s the same for Pemba and his girlfriend from TikTok. The notable change in his life isn’t the existence of the internet; It’s that he found the girl of his dreams - the person he may one day marry. His perception of the internet’s presence quickly took a backseat to the personal changes it enabled. For Pemba, it was finding love. For me, it was learning one of my family members was in the hospital. Both felt bigger than a cell tower to us.

When we discuss the way the internet shapes our lives, it’s important to consider how easy it is to forget about its very existence. In Manang, I was forced to appreciate what it enabled only when it stopped working, but other than that, and writing this paper of course, it evaded my perception. I certainly never thought to myself, while scrolling Instagram, “I’m using the internet, I’m using the internet, and oh jolly, what an amazing thing this here internet is!” That would take up brain power that I could have instead allocated to something actually important, like a video of a herd of giraffes bending down as far as their lanky legs allow to sniff a turtle.

David Foster Wallace begins his seminal 2005 Kenyon College commencement speech with a story about fish:

“There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes ‘What the hell is water?”’

He uses this analogy to say that one of the more important choices we humans make on a daily basis is what think about - what specifically we focus on, when so often the most “obvious, important realities are the hardest to see or talk about.”

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53 David Foster Wallace, “This Is Water,” Commencement Speech, Kenyon College, 2005
54 Ibid
possible, if not probable, that two people, living in a similar digital reality, will have entirely
different perceptions of it. To Sonam Gurung, the internet replaced a world he once shared with
his friends, with one he felt alone in. To his older brother Pemba, that’s just called growing up.
To Mr. Phuntsok, social media is replacing the cultural identity of young Manangis with that of
other places; and birthday cakes have no place replacing buckwheat bread. To Binod Gurung,
social media is a tool he can use to promote an important part of his Manangi identity - the use of
language - to the next generation; and who doesn’t love a birthday cake? Both experiences are
ture, and both reveal to us the challenge Manangis face, along with everyone who entered the
world wide web in the past few decades. That is to make it make good. Unfortunately, we don’t
always have agency over what the internet does to our lives, but I believe it will benefit us to
remind ourselves as often as possible, that it is there.
Interviews

Sonam Gurung, Hotel Yeti, Manang, October 24, 2023

Pemba Gurung, Hotel Mystic, Manang, November 17, 2023

Binod Gurung, Hotel Yeti, Manang, November 15, 2023

Tashi R. Ghale, Mountain Lake Hotel, Manang, November 16, 2023

Ongma Tsering, Mountain Lake Hotel, Manang, November 14, 2023

Ananda Raj Ghimire, Shree Annapurna Secondary School, Manang, November 19 2023

Shashank Timilsina MD., Himalayan Aid Post, Manang, November 20 2023

Karma Gurung, Manang, November 12-25, 2023

Pema Phuntsok, Butsok Gompa, Manang, November 13, 2023
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Suggestions for Further Research

The internet is constantly evolving, as are our interactions with it. Here are some developments, some specific to Manang, others less so, that you may find interesting to research.

- The impact of weather prediction via the internet on farming
- Whether there is space for minority languages in social media and cellular communication
- Social media and domestic tourism development
- Social media’s influence on culinary practices
- The lasting impacts of online school during COVID
- The future of Ne Festival in Manang

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