

## Social Norm Espousal and Sense of Belongingness Among the Mizo: The Role of Social Participation in a Collectivistic Society

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### Abstract:

*The present study examined the relationship between social norm espousal and sense of belongingness among the Mizo people of Mizoram, India, and explored whether active versus inactive participation in community organizations produces differential outcomes on these variables. A sample of 216 Mizo participants — 117 active and 99 inactive social participants — was recruited through random sampling from Aizawl city. Social norm espousal was assessed using the Social-Norm Espousal Scale (SNES; Bizer et al., 2014), and sense of belongingness was measured using the Sense of Community Index-2 (SCI-2; Chavis et al., 2008). Independent-samples *t*-tests, Pearson correlation, and simple regression analyses were employed. Results revealed that active social participants scored significantly higher than inactive participants on both social norm espousal and sense of belongingness. Significant correlation was observed between social norm espousal and sense of belongingness. Simple regression analysis further confirmed that social norm espousal was a significant predictor of sense of belongingness. These findings highlight the role of community institutions in shaping normative identity and felt belonging among the Mizo.*

*Keywords: social norm espousal, sense of belongingness, social participation, collectivism, Mizo community.*

### Introduction

Human beings are inherently social creatures whose psychological functioning is deeply intertwined with the communities to which they belong. Among the many mechanisms that sustain social life, social norms and the sense of belonging occupy a position of particular importance: they organize collective behaviour, validate individual identity, and bind communities together through shared expectation and mutual recognition. While the relationship between normative conformity and belonging has long been theorized in Western social psychology, empirical investigation of this relationship within non-Western, collectivistic communities remains limited. The present study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between social norm espousal and sense of belongingness among the Mizo people of Mizoram, India — a community characterized by deep collectivistic values and robust social institutions.

Social norms are broadly understood as shared rules of conduct sustained by the social mechanisms of approval and disapproval (Elster, 1989). They emerge as the convergent, often unplanned, result of individuals' interactions and collectively define what is acceptable and what is not within a given social group or society (Bicchieri and Muldoon, 2014). Research confirms that while social norms exert a pervasive influence on behaviour across life domains, individuals differ substantially in the extent to

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which they endorse and adhere to these norms (Cialdini et al., 1990). This individual-level variation in norm endorsement — referred to as social norm espousal — is the focus of the present study. Social norm espousal captures the degree to which a person perceives social norms as important and valuable guides for conduct (Bizer et al., 2014). Critically, people who espouse norms more strongly are more likely to behave in norm-consistent ways, suggesting that espousal is a meaningful psychological variable with real behavioural consequences.

The maintenance of social norm espousal is closely linked to social proximity and active engagement with one's community. Burger et al. (2004) demonstrated that the decline in norm espousal can be substantially reduced when individuals feel socially close to group members — a condition most readily achieved through active social participation. When individuals share group membership, they are attentive to both norm compliance and norm violation by others, and this attentiveness shapes their own behaviour in ways that differ markedly from reactions to socially distant others (McEvily et al., 2006; Balliet et al., 2014). Social networks further facilitate the transmission of norms, as individuals observe the behaviour of network members and infer what constitutes typical or appropriate conduct (Kashima et al., 2013). Notably, this normative influence typically operates below the level of conscious awareness (Nolan et al., 2008), making the social environment a powerful and often invisible shaper of individual behaviour.

Parallel to the literature on social norms is a substantial body of work on the sense of belonging — the felt experience of being a valued, accepted member of a social group or community. Baumeister and Leary (1995) identified the need to belong as a fundamental human motivation, arguing that the desire for stable, meaningful interpersonal bonds is a pervasive force shaping affect, cognition, and behaviour. Belonging is not merely a positive feeling; it is a psychological necessity. According to Berger and Luckmann (2004), belonging encompasses formal and informal relational ties — family, community membership, shared values — through which individuals develop identity, social reference, and a sense of rootedness. Maslow (1970) similarly attributed central importance to belonging needs across the lifespan, and Ryan and Deci (2004) identified relatedness as one of the three basic psychological needs underpinning well-being and motivation. As Sousa (2010) observed, the sense of belonging is perhaps the most fundamental reason human beings form groups, communities, and societies.

Individuals who conform to group norms are more likely to be recognized and accepted as legitimate members of the community, thereby experiencing a greater sense of belonging (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). This is consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), which holds that individuals derive a significant portion of their identity from group memberships and are motivated to maintain a positive social identity. Active participation in social activities — and the norm compliance such participation entails — enhances identification with the group, reinforcing both norm espousal and belonging simultaneously (Jetten et al., 2012). Haim-Litevsky et al. (2023) demonstrated empirically that norm conformity represents one key pathway through which participation in social activities contributes to belonging and well-being. Putnam (2000) similarly found that individuals embedded in dense civic networks were more likely to internalize and enact the norms of those networks, illustrating the mutually reinforcing relationship between norm espousal and community participation.

The Mizo people — collectively referring to the various tribes inhabiting Mizoram — are characterized by a deeply collectivistic social orientation in which communal participation, mutual obligation, and group cohesion take precedence over individual interests. This ethos is encapsulated in the cultural principle of *Tlawmngaihna* — the governing moral code of Mizo society that prescribes selflessness, industriousness, and the prioritization of others' needs above one's own. The Mizo saying, '*Sem sem dam dam, ei bil thi thi*' (Lorrain, 1894), captures the normative force of this principle, which has historically guided helping behaviour, resource sharing, and community solidarity among the Mizo.

Among the many organizations that embody and transmit these norms within the Mizo community, the Young Mizo Association (YMA) is one of the most prominent non-governmental organizations,

with branches across every locality in Mizoram, playing a vital role in social, cultural, and community development. Similarly, organizations such as the Kristian Thalai Pawl (KTP) and Thalai Kristian Pawl (TKP) are among the major church-based youth. While these represent only a portion of the broader organizational landscape in Mizoram, active membership in such organizations is widely regarded as prestigious, and the norms they and others like them promulgate — of service, collective responsibility, and communal solidarity — are deeply internalized by members. The degree of active versus inactive participation in these organizations thus provides a meaningful indicator of social integration, norm exposure, and felt belonging within the Mizo community. Despite a growing body of empirical literature, the specific relationship between social norm espousal and sense of belongingness remains insufficiently examined, particularly within collectivistic, non-Western cultural contexts such as the Mizo community. The present study addresses this gap with the following objectives:

1. To examine differences between active and inactive social participants on social norm espousal and sense of belongingness;
2. To determine the pattern of relationship between social norm espousal and sense of belongingness;
3. To assess the predictive role of social norm espousal on sense of belongingness among the Mizo.

Based on the foregoing review, the following hypotheses were formulated:

1. It is expected that active social participants would report significantly higher scores on social norm espousal compared to inactive participants;
2. It is expected that active social participants would report significantly higher scores on sense of belongingness compared to inactive participants;
3. It is expected that social norm espousal would be significantly and positively correlated with sense of belongingness;
4. It is expected that social norm espousal would significantly and positively predict sense of belongingness among the Mizo.

## Method

### Sample

Sample comprised of 216 Mizo individuals recruited through random sampling from Aizawl city, the capital of Mizoram. They were divided into two groups based on their self-reported level of participation in community organizations: 117 active social participants (those who reported active involvement in church organizations such as the TKP/KTP and/or the YMA) and 99 inactive social participants (those who reported non-active or minimal involvement in such organizations). Inclusion criteria required participants to be literate, free from identified mental health conditions, residing within Mizoram, and willing to participate voluntarily.

### Psychological Measures

#### Social-Norm Espousal Scale (SNES; Bizer et al., 2014):

Social norm espousal was assessed using the 14-item SNES, designed to measure the degree to which individuals perceive social norms as important and valuable. Responses were made on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = Extremely Characteristic to 5 = Extremely Uncharacteristic), with five items reverse-coded (items 2, 3, 8, 12, and 13). Higher scores indicate stronger espousal of social norms. The scale demonstrated excellent reliability in the present sample (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ).

#### Sense of Community Index-2 (SCI-2; Chavis et al., 2008).

Sense of belongingness was assessed using the 24-item SCI-2, the most widely used measure of community belonging in the social sciences. Grounded in McMillan and Chavis's (1986) theory of sense of

community, the scale encompasses four subscales: reinforcement of needs, membership, influence, and shared emotional connection. A notable strength of the SCI-2 is its flexibility — it can be administered and interpreted either as a unidimensional total score reflecting overall sense of community or at the subscale level to examine specific dimensions of belonging independently. Responses were made on a four-point scale (0 = Not at all to 3 = Completely), yielding a maximum total score of 72. In the present study, the total score was used to capture an overall index of sense of belongingness. Higher scores indicate a greater sense of belonging and community integration. Internal consistency in the present sample was excellent (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ).

### Procedure

Data were collected through individual administration of the questionnaire battery in participants' homes and community settings across Aizawl city. The purpose of the study was explained and informed consent was obtained from the participants prior to data collection. Social participation was operationalized as a demographic variable: participants who reported active involvement in both or either of the KTP/TKP and YMA were classified as active social participants; all others were classified as inactive. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were assured throughout.

### Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for both study variables by group. Active social participants obtained higher mean scores on social norm espousal ( $M = 65.09$ ,  $SD = 24.63$ ) than inactive participants ( $M = 54.68$ ,  $SD = 24.08$ ). Similarly, active participants reported higher sense of belongingness ( $M = 64.74$ ,  $SD = 25.05$ ) than inactive participants ( $M = 53.75$ ,  $SD = 24.80$ ). Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .87 for the social norm espousal and .89 for sense of belongingness, confirming strong internal consistency for both measures in the present sample.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics, Reliability, and Normality Indices by Group*

| Variable                      | n   | M     | SD    | $\alpha$ | Skewness | SE   | Kurtosis | SE   |
|-------------------------------|-----|-------|-------|----------|----------|------|----------|------|
| <b>Social Norm Espousal</b>   |     |       |       |          |          |      |          |      |
| Active Participants           | 117 | 65.09 | 24.63 | .87      | 0.43     | 0.22 | -0.73    | 0.44 |
| Inactive Participants         | 99  | 54.68 | 24.08 | .87      | 0.77     | 0.24 | -0.26    | 0.48 |
| <b>Sense of Belongingness</b> |     |       |       |          |          |      |          |      |
| Active Participants           | 117 | 64.74 | 25.05 | .89      | 0.39     | 0.22 | -0.76    | 0.44 |
| Inactive Participants         | 99  | 53.75 | 24.80 | .89      | 0.75     | 0.24 | -0.36    | 0.47 |

*Note.* N = 216. M = mean; SD = standard deviation;  $\alpha$  = Cronbach's alpha; SE = standard error of skewness/kurtosis.

Levene's test results (Table 2) were non-significant for both social norm espousal ( $F = .495$ ,  $p = .482$ ) and sense of belongingness ( $F = .252$ ,  $p = .615$ ), confirming equal variances across active and inactive groups and satisfying the homogeneity of variance assumption required for independent-samples  $t$ -test.

**Table 2**

*Levene's Test of Homogeneity of Variances*

| Variable               | Levene Statistic | $p$  |
|------------------------|------------------|------|
| Social Norm Espousal   | .495             | .482 |
| Sense of Belongingness | .252             | .615 |

Table 3 presents the results of the independent-samples  $t$ -test indicating significant differences

between active and inactive participants on the psychological variables. Active participants demonstrated significantly higher social norm espousal ( $M = 65.09$ ,  $SD = 24.63$ ) compared to inactive participants ( $M = 54.68$ ,  $SD = 24.08$ ),  $t(214) = 3.13$ ,  $p = .002$ , with Cohen's  $d = .43$ , indicating a small effect size (Cohen, 1988). Similarly, active participants reported significantly greater sense of belongingness ( $M = 64.74$ ,  $SD = 25.05$ ) than inactive participants ( $M = 53.75$ ,  $SD = 24.80$ ),  $t(214) = 3.22$ ,  $p = .001$ , Cohen's  $d = .44$ , also indicating a small effect size (Cohen, 1988).

Table 3

*Comparison of Active and Inactive Social Participants on Psychological Variables*

| Variable               | Active |       | Inactive |       | t(214) | p    | Cohen's d |
|------------------------|--------|-------|----------|-------|--------|------|-----------|
|                        | M      | SD    | M        | SD    |        |      |           |
| Social Norm Espousal   | 65.09  | 24.63 | 54.68    | 24.08 | 3.13   | .002 | .43       |
| Sense of Belongingness | 64.74  | 25.05 | 53.75    | 24.80 | 3.22   | .001 | .44       |

Note. N = 216.

Table 4 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients among study variables. Social norm espousal and sense of belongingness were significantly and positively correlated ( $r = .792$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating a large positive association between the two constructs (Cohen, 1988).

Table 4

*Pearson Correlation Between Social Norm Espousal and Sense of Belongingness*

| Variable                  | 1      |
|---------------------------|--------|
| 1. Social Norm Espousal   | —      |
| 2. Sense of Belongingness | .792** |

Table 5 presents the results of the simple linear regression analysis with social norm espousal as the predictor and sense of belongingness as the criterion variable. The regression model was statistically significant,  $F(1, 214) = 360.13$ ,  $p < .001$ , accounting for 62.7% of the variance in sense of belongingness ( $R^2 = .627$ ). Social norm espousal significantly and positively predicted sense of belongingness ( $\beta = .792$ ,  $B = .811$ ,  $SE = .043$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.727, .895]), indicating that higher social norm espousal was associated with higher levels of sense of belongingness.

Table 5

*Simple Regression: Social Norm Espousal Predicting Sense of Belongingness*

| Predictor            | B      | SE B  | $\beta$ | $R^2$ | F        | 95% CI          |
|----------------------|--------|-------|---------|-------|----------|-----------------|
| Constant             | 10.771 | 2.782 |         |       |          | [5.288, 16.254] |
| Social Norm Espousal | .811   | .043  | .792**  | .627  | 360.13** | [.727, .895]    |

Note. N = 216; df = (1, 214). B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE B = standard error of B;  $\beta$  = standardized coefficient;  $R^2$  = coefficient of determination; F = F-ratio.

## Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between social norm espousal and sense of belongingness among the Mizo, comparing active and inactive members of community organizations and testing the predictive role of social norm espousal on sense of belongingness. Active social participants reported significantly higher social norm espousal and sense of belongingness than inactive participants, the two constructs were strongly correlated, and social norm espousal significantly predicted sense of belongingness. These findings carry important implications for understanding psychological

functioning in collectivistic communities.

### Group Differences in Social Norm Espousal and Sense of Belongingness

The finding that active social participants scored significantly higher on social norm espousal than inactive participants is consistent with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), which holds that individuals acquire and internalize normative behaviour through observation and participation in social contexts. Active members of organizations such as the YMA and KTP are exposed more frequently and more deeply to the norms these institutions promulgate — norms of service, solidarity, and communal obligation rooted in the principle of *Tlawmngaihna*. This repeated exposure, reinforced through social approval and community recognition, is likely to strengthen norm espousal over time. The result aligns with Putnam (2000) and Fisher and Ackerman (1998), both of whom found positive relationships between social participation and norm espousal, and with McPherson et al. (2001), who documented the role of social network participation in shaping normative attitudes.

The significantly higher sense of belongingness among active participants is equally consistent with the existing literature. Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) holds that individuals derive part of their identity from group memberships, and that active group involvement deepens identification and belonging. Jetten et al. (2012) provided empirical support for the connection between group identification and felt belongingness, and Hughey et al. (1999) demonstrated that active social participation enhances sense of community specifically. In the Mizo context, active membership in the YMA and KTP is not merely associational — it carries cultural prestige, social visibility, and moral significance. Active participants are publicly recognized as contributors to community welfare, an acknowledgment that reinforces their sense of being a valued and integral part of the social fabric. Conversely, inactive participants — less exposed to communal norms and less socially visible — may experience weaker social ties and a correspondingly diminished sense of belonging.

### Relationship between Social Norm Espousal and Sense of Belongingness

The present study revealed a strong positive correlation between social norm espousal and sense of belongingness. In a deeply collectivistic society such as the Mizo, where community norms are not merely formal rules but lived expressions of cultural identity, the degree to which one endorses these norms may be intimately tied to the degree to which one feels part of the community. Norm espousal and belonging may function as two facets of a shared underlying psychological orientation toward the group — what might be termed *communal identification*. This interpretation resonates with Haim-Litevsky et al.'s (2023) finding that norm conformity and belonging are mutually reinforcing, and with the broader theoretical argument that in collectivistic cultures, the self is constituted through group membership and adherence to shared norms (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Sousa, 2010). It is possible that in the specific socio-cultural context of Mizoram — where community organizations are central to daily social life — both constructs are shaped by largely the same environmental and cultural forces, producing higher convergence than would be observed in more heterogeneous or less tightly knit communities.

### Social Norm Espousal as a Predictor of Sense of Belongingness

The regression results support the hypothesis that social norm espousal predicts sense of belongingness among the Mizo. In collectivistic communities where belonging is not assumed but must be demonstrated through normative conduct, the espousal and enactment of group norms may function as the primary mechanism through which individuals earn social recognition and felt inclusion. The YMA, YLA, KTP, TKP etc. are norm-governed institutions in which membership recognition, access to community resources, and social esteem are contingent upon visible compliance with communal expectations. An individual who strongly espouses these norms signals to the community their investment in the collective good, and it is this signal — and the community's response to it — that generates the felt sense of belonging. This account is consistent with Burger et al.'s (2004) finding that social prox-

imity, achieved through norm-consistent participation, is a key driver of community cohesion, and with Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory that norm-consistent conduct signals ingroup commitment and reinforces felt belonging.

### Limitations and Suggestions

Social participation was operationalized as a binary variable, lacking the granularity of a validated multi-item measure. The sample was drawn exclusively from Aizawl city, limiting generalizability to rural Mizo communities. Future research employing latent variable modelling or confirmatory factor analysis would further clarify the discriminant and convergent validity of the constructs examined.

### Implications of the Study

Notwithstanding these limitations, the present findings carry meaningful implications for community psychology and mental health promotion in Mizoram and similar collectivistic settings. The consistent advantages of active participation on both norm espousal and belonging suggest that community organizations function not merely as social clubs but as psychological institutions that actively construct identity, belonging, and normative commitment among their members. Educators, community leaders, and mental health practitioners in Mizoram should consider strategies that facilitate meaningful participation — particularly for individuals who are currently inactive — as a pathway to strengthening community cohesion and psychological well-being. Creating inclusive, welcoming environments within community organizations, reducing barriers to participation, and recognizing the contributions of members across all levels of involvement could yield significant psychological and social benefits for the community as a whole.

### Conclusion

The result of the present study underscores the psychological significance of normative integration in collectivistic communities, suggesting that adherence to and endorsement of shared community norms is not merely a social obligation but a meaningful pathway to felt belonging. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of how cultural norms and community participation shape psychological well-being in non-Western contexts, and highlight the need for culturally situated frameworks in the study of belonging and social integration.

**Conflict of Interest Statement:** The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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