Digital Inequalities in Media Education During COVID-19 in Nepalese Private and Public Colleges

Trishna Acharya
Ph.D. Research Fellow, Department of Languages and Mass Communication, School of Arts, Kathmandu University
Email: trishnaacharya48@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explored the influence of institutional ownership, resource viability, and digital literacy on the impact of COVID-19 on media education in private and public colleges in Nepal. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, two colleges were purposively selected to examine the experiences of administrators, lecturers, and students during the transition from in-person to online learning. The research first documented their experiences during this shift in academic delivery, followed by a critical analysis of how varying levels of digital literacy affected the teaching and learning of media-related courses during the pandemic. The key findings of the study showed that private colleges experienced financial setbacks, which hindered their overall performance. In contrast, public colleges got support from the University Grants Commission and local governments. However, they struggled to initiate remote classes for financially disadvantaged and digitally disconnected students. In both kinds of institutions, digital inequalities have had a significant impact on both teaching and administrative effectiveness. Delivering practical skills in media-related courses was another challenge for both. This study still seemed relevant because it provides insights into stakeholders' digital literacy, ICT integration in education, and disaster and crisis preparedness in the educational sector.

Keywords: Academic activities, digital literacy, COVID-19, media education, ownership pattern

Introduction

This study was about the impact of COVID-19 on tertiary-level media education in Nepal. It was significant due to three reasons: it analyzed the effect of COVID-19 on media education of Nepalese private and public colleges, the impact on course delivery due to the shift towards online education, and it attempted to understand the experiences of stakeholders such as administrators, educators, and students. It considered administrators, besides educators and students in academic institutions, an important part of the academic community.

Before the pandemic, there was a significant effort to increase digital literacy by governmental, non-governmental, and private sectors. Nepal's key ICT in education-related policies include the IT policy (2000), National Curriculum Framework for school education (2005, 2007), ICT in Education Master Plan (2013)**,** National ICT Policy (2015)**,** School Sector Development Plan (2016–2023)**,** the Digital Nepal Framework (2019)**,** the National Science, Technology, and Innovation Policy (2019)**,** and the Teacher ICT Competency Framework (2016)**.** They considered it a 21st-century basic skill in the era of global and digital citizenship. Despite such efforts to improve connectivity from infrastructural development to incorporating these skills in curricula, the digital divide was significantly evident. Research studies in Nepal and abroad showed that the major cause of the digital divide was economic disparity among the students enrolled in private and public colleges. Private college students residing in urban areas had better reach and access to information and communication technology. They had better chances of digital literacy than public college students. Another factor was that the academic community did not take digital literacy very seriously before the pandemic for various reasons, including the administrative mindset, lecturers' reluctance to advance their classes using digital tools, and students' denial of its perusal for academic advancement.

The attitude of technological laggardness in the pre-pandemic time became problematic to all parties during COVID-19. Online classes became the only option in the face of a life-threatening communicable disease. The pre-pandemic education sector had various issues due to digital inequalities, which were subtle but became apparent and robust during the pandemic, compelling people to leave the profession. The media-related course included new media in its curriculum, but it was taught theoretically, not giving much significance to hands-on skills. During COVID-19, all educational institutions, including universities, were compelled to shift their physical classes to

online mode throughout the world, and Nepal was no exception. This shift has impacted the media-related programs as well in the universities. The Journalism and Mass Communication (JMC) program of Tribhuvan University is run by affiliated colleges with two kinds of ownership patterns: public and private colleges.

The World Health Organization (WHO) announced the COVID-19 outbreak on 13 March 2020. The Nepal government decided to impose a lockdown after the detection of a second patient on 24 March 2020, which lasted for six months. The second wave of lockdown started on 31 March 2021 and lasted for five months. During this period, WHO made significant health-related updates to the national government's decisions to protect its citizens' lives. On the basis of it, the government took political decisions constantly to reduce the impact of viruses as much as possible. At the beginning phase of the pandemic, only the area of health was focused on, but as it started to spread, only the government felt the need to address the education sector.

COVID-19 started in December 2019, whereas the government launched the new National Education Policy in November 2019. It addressed the need for a federal structure based on the right to education in Article 31 as the fundamental right given by the Constitution of Nepal 2015, but the provision had not addressed education during emergency situations like natural disasters or emergency periods like COVID-19. It was introduced while dealing with the rampant issue of COVID-19. During this unexpected health emergency, the Nepalese government's first priority was physiological health. Although there was an impact on psychological health due to the traumatic outbreak, the lifestyle change had affected people's way of thinking.

Despite the crisis being at its peak, educational institutions witnessed digital transformation during this period. It pushed the academic community to be digitally literate, giving them no choice other than to mitigate the digital inequalities at whatever level possible. Information fad from multimedia brought a crisis of authentic information, encouraging ambiguity due to no clear-cut policy to run classes and some controversy about the effectiveness of online classes, the digital divide and the payment of online classes disturbed the ongoing classes with the effort of educational institutions. These institutional efforts were attacked on moral grounds, which created distrust, especially for private colleges.

Pre-existent digital divides in Nepal's tertiary-level media education, particularly between public and private colleges, were evident by the sudden shift to online learning during COVID-19. It helps to understand the underlying reason behind the differences

in the experiences of stakeholders and the efficacy of online education impacted by differences in infrastructure, digital literacy, and institutional support.

The objectives of this study were (i) to analyze how ownership patterns (public and private) influenced digital inequality and affected the administrative and pedagogical performance of media education during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal. (ii) to identify and evaluate the strategies adopted by public and private colleges to address digital disparities and sustain the delivery of practical media education during the pandemic.

Based on the objectives, the research questions were (i) How did ownership patterns impact digital inequality and media education performance during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal? (ii) What strategies did public and private colleges adopt to address digital disparities and sustain practical media education during the pandemic?

This study is significant as it provides empirical and theoretical insights about the impact of the pandemic on media education and provides stakeholders' perceptions and ground realities about the level of adaptation to technological advancement. Here, the grounds to compare and contrast were ownership pattern, digital literacy, geographical location, and the experience of research participants and respondents.

Impact of Covid-19 on Education System in the Global context

Globally, research regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the education system was conducted. Relevant previous studies of supranational organizations were systematically studied. Global experiences of the developing and developed worlds were also traced to understand the major concerns pre, during, and post-pandemic.

Emergence and absolute use of new media technology during COVID-19 challenged the supranational organization. The United Nations' attempt was not well received when it introduced the 'New World Information and Communication Order' (NWICO) through UNESCO. It was mainly because of the unwillingness of economically affluent countries to withdraw their membership, resenting it. Although NWICO was mainly to address the disparity in communication flow through mainstream media, the rampant use of ICT in education showed the unofficial yet loud and authentic restoration of equilibrium, undermining the old bases of even international power politics to some extent. There could be a critical question that still hardware or core technological ownership in satellite, telecommunication, devices and even software manufacturing is in the control of a handful of multinational companies

in first and emerging second world nations. Yet in content production, cultural hegemony was threatened by the mushroomed content production by subalterns due to the omnipresence of new media and increased multiple literacies. Horton discusses six different categories of what he called the "21st century survival literacies": basic literacy skills, computer literacy, media literacy, distance education and e-learning, cultural literacy, and information literacy (Martinsson, 2009, p. 4).

Finding funds to run the educational programs is always challenging in both private and public colleges. It is still challenging even in developed nations, which became more apparent during the pandemic. The ownership pattern of the United States (US) colleges and universities shows that it is the world's largest private sector of higher education, comprising 55.2% of its 3561 universities, and these institutions compete for the students' enrolment among each other (Gordon et al., 2002). Searching for funds becomes a more responsible endeavor for the public institutions when there is defined accountability towards taxpayer money. Labaree's (1997) studies showed the struggle to define educational goals in America, showcasing the three educational perspectives of the citizens, the taxpayer, and the consumer, which are defined as democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility. Public investment in higher education focused on the transfer to public college students; however, it misses potential general equilibrium effects on the private college and labour markets (Bound & Simon, 2024).

There are both similarities and dissimilarities between public and private institutions and their association with financial reporting practices (Gordon et al., 2002). Ramlo (2021) shared that public and private university leaders of the USA were compelled to make budget reductions with numerous possibilities, including the elimination of tenured faculty. ABC News (Fies & Hill, April 28, 2020) reported that the impact of the corona virus pandemic could be devastating financially, referring to the shutdown of some small private colleges as well as large public universities such as the University of Michigan, which anticipated losses of millions of dollars ($400 M to $1B) due to the issuing of refunds for unused housing and dining plans. Financial struggles and setbacks were apparent even in the developed nations, so it's still a considerable area to look into while studying the COVID-19 impact in the education sector of developing countries.

Foundational differences are evident in the institutional functionality of colleges with the prompted impact of the digital shift in both kinds of colleges. As a result of the global pandemic, universities carried out teaching in a digital mode, accelerating the

inclusion and use of technologies in methodological adaptation. Latin America's transition from a face-to-face educational model to a distance model affected by emergencies, technological precariousness, and lack of planning heightened the need for media literacy in the region. Because of it, the changes that occurred were analyzed in order to propose a critical agenda from the perspective of teachers (Mateus et al., 2022).

Here, it was necessary to consider Wilson et al. (1969), who emphasized that educators must understand the student's private world to effectively expand it through education. Similarly, Powell and McGown (2010) traced teachers' role adjustment in universities/schools, collaborative teachers as learners, collaborators, and social activists. Nelson et al. (2011) shared the results from a survey of teaching faculty at a medium-sized university in the southeastern United States to determine core curriculum items to ensure skills to fully participate in the digital society.

Likewise, Winters and Maguire (2022) studied that mastering online teaching imposed by the pandemic was challenging for many teachers, yet it helped to upskill teachers through trial and error. Flack et al. (2020) researched educators' perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning in Australia and New Zealand. They identified potential levers for change, including a focus on platform quality, cohesive strategies, and support for the implementation of multiple technologies, increasing opportunities for social connection and communication, interventions for high-needs communities, and a focus on supporting social-emotional health for both students and teachers. Efforts to adapt to digital technology, recognizing the change in the role of educators, were asserted in the pre-pandemic period also, yet many of them were unprepared when it hit massively on a global scale.

Expectations in the students from the university education vary based on ownership, as going to private or public colleges. It depended on the economic status of the student, either to increase employability for the job market or to enhance one's horizon of knowledge. Although the theoretical expectation was that it would support the holistic development of the learner, including their possibility to be employed and lead an economically comfortable life. Learners' experience of university was widely altered by the pandemic experience, as they lost the prime years of their lives as students. Platz and Holtbrugge (2016) shared the experience of German universities that perceived employability was rated as more important for private universities than for state universities.

The importance of digital literacy in tertiary education was studied by different disciplines. Krelova, Berkova, and Kubisova (2021) did empirical research on 1233 students about the attitudes of Czech college students towards digital literacy and the technical aids in the times of COVID-19. Results showed that digital literacy was influenced in terms of the specific study program specialization, study level, and study form. Dooley et al. (2023) studied ways that tertiary-level screen production education in Australia was impacted during and post-COVID-19. The result of the study showed that concept development and fundamental production skills using mobile devices were amplified, but advanced technical skills and student collaboration were hampered due to remote learning conditions. Similarly, they noticed a shift in storytelling towards shorter individual projects exploring themes of isolation, with some collectives producing anthology series. The digital divide between learners was also significant, as per their financial situation and the affordability of internet services and digital devices. It became more visible and internalized during pandemic emergencies.

Besides educators and students, other significant stakeholders, such as the government and administrators' responses to emergency situations, also seemed an important area to dive into. Gulua et al. (2022) studied the students' attitude towards the management challenges in the private and state universities in Georgia, interviewing 342 students, which showed a very positive attitude of private university students in comparison to public universities. The UK government sought to respond to lockdowns and lost learning during the pandemic in multiple ways, including replacing cancelled examinations and compensating for lost learning through a National Tutoring Program (Kippin, 2023). Experience varied as per the developmental status of the countries too; African experience of ICT in education represents the status of many developing regions throughout the globe. Amponsah and Onuoha (2013) researched the performance and challenges of private universities in Ghana and Nigeria, tracing the major problem as facing private universities in the two countries being largely financial: the high cost of training and development of faculty and staff; lack of well-resourced libraries; inability to retain top-quality faculty and staff; and inadequate teaching and learning equipment and infrastructure. Omosekejimi et al. (2019) surveyed 1500 lecturers in Nigeria about ICT and digital literacy, where results showed that most of the lecturers were not proficient in the use of PowerPoint, Excel, and spreadsheets, and could not apply computers to resolve real-life academic problems. Support mechanisms are also needed to comprehend the gravity of the gaps in the education system created

by technological advancement. Despite the pandemic's negative impact, it was an eye-opening experience for the responsible stakeholders who were taking issues of the digital divide and literacy for granted.

Asian scholars also conducted a significant amount of research about the pandemic's impact on the education system. It maps the level of impact of the pandemic throughout the different regions of Asia, including Middle Eastern, Eastern, Southeastern, Central and South Asian. Different stakeholders suffered differently, and its overall pressure altered the experience of the university system once and for all, which cannot be undone easily. The comparative study of Muslim countries in education shows that the performance of public sector Malaysians seems to be better than that of public sector Pakistani faculties, but private sector educators' performances are similar (Munaf, 2009). Similarly, Awang et al. (2014) show the gap between the private universities' students' expectations and experiences in Malaysia. The study found that most of the students' expectations were from private universities. The expressed dissatisfaction of the students from their universities is alarming to question the purpose of enrolling in tertiary education. It can be seen expressed either in the form of a dropping rate of enrolment or increased drop-out in universities. This type of problem existed even before the pandemic.

The pandemic further encouraged the students to search for alternatives to university education and choose foreign employment or other job opportunities instead. It was witnessed globally after the sudden drop in the rate of university enrolment post-pandemic, especially in developing nations like Nepal. Those who were already in university also faced varied problems in continuing their education. Research conducted in Oman by Abushammala et al. (2021) showed the impact of COVID-19 on the private higher education system, as the major concern for students was the inability to pay tuition fees due to the financial implications caused by the pandemic. Nahar et al. (2020) studied the challenges and policy responses to address the impact of COVID-19 in private higher education institutions in Bangladesh. Findings of his study showed that the pandemic created a barrier to the successive growth of tertiary education in terms of dropping enrolment in the coming academic years. Dropping enrolment affected the salary payment of their academic and non-academic staff. It increased the possibility of job loss among educators at the cost of students' right to education due to the economic crisis. Emergency situations hit the developing countries differently from the developed countries, bringing not only economic but also cultural setbacks.

Not only was participation in education hampered, but the pandemic also brought psychological pressure. Indonesia had the highest number of COVID-19 patients in Central Asia, and students were unable to take part in learning. The government issued a learning process policy in the midst of the pandemic. This policy determines the learning process, which is usually carried out face-to-face, to online learning (Batubara, 2021). Pandemic effects are expected to persistently affect the mental well-being of college students, which helps to recognize the mental health services to combat mental instability, and universities and colleges should create an environment that will foster mental health awareness among Philippine college students (Lim et al., 2022). Psychological impact can have a long-term impact if necessary intervention is not done timely.

Positive impacts of the pandemic also surfaced in some studies, such as increased digital literacy, and the need to prioritize the issues of the education sector among stakeholders was felt. Based on a survey of 5000 Chinese college students during the COVID-19 pandemic period, it was identified that COVID-19 information from mainstream Chinese media and overseas media as well as social media, has had a significant promoting effect on the online knowledge acquisition of college students (Xie, Zang & Ponzoa, 2020). Khan (2023) viewed that pandemics have taught that education should not be de-prioritized. He further viewed that there should be routine negotiation among technologies, stakeholders, and regulatory bodies. The COVID-19 pandemic led universities to transform traditional teaching methodologies into distance education. Therefore, social media have become progressively prominent as teaching and learning resources in universities. Several studies have been conducted for the development of social media as a learning tool. However, there was limited empirical evidence supporting this claim (Papademetriou et al., 2022). Educational transformation from these experiences can be asserted as a long-term positive impact of the pandemic experience if actualized materially.

Nepalese higher education faced a significant challenge of misalignment between the nature and focus of education and the actual needs and demands of society. This issue was particularly evident in college and university education and mirrors similar concerns observed across South Asian systems, as well as in countries like China and South Korea with their stringent testing regimes. Even in the western world, where increasingly standardized testing methods dominate education, formal education

often fails to align with the diverse demands and real-world applications of disciplinary knowledge, academic skills, and intellectual experiences (Sharma, 2019).

Tribhuvan University (TU) introduced the Journalism and Mass Communication course at the intermediate-level study from its constituent Ratna Rajyalaxmi (RR) College in 1976 AD. TU has given affiliation to more than ninety colleges to teach the course. It has more than three hundred students in constituent colleges and more than two thousand students in affiliated colleges studying at the undergraduate level (Adhikary & Pant, 2014). Non-Western countries, including Nepal, had three options while they were developing curricula of communication and/or allied disciplines. First, they could have drawn on native perspectives, thereby primarily incorporating indigenous concepts, if not theories and models, of communication. Second, it was much easier for them to adopt solely the Western discursive paradigm. Third, they could have adopted a comparative approach, thus incorporating both indigenous and Western content and facilitating 'indigenization'. Of these, the adoption of the Western paradigm has been the general practice as it suits the project of globalization, which legitimizes unidirectional gateways for the flow of information (Adhikary, 2018).

Contextually, there were several studies conducted from various disciplines to understand the impact of COVID-19 in the education sector of Nepal, which, to some extent, was relevant to media education too. Especially the common issues in the education sector, like teachers's digital skills, pedagogical aspects, students' participation and so on. Nine million (8,796,624) students in Nepal are affected due to school/university closures in response to the pandemic. Out of this number, 958,127 (11%) are in pre-primary, 2,466,570 (28%) are in primary, 3,463,763 (39%) are in secondary and 404,718 (5%) are in tertiary education (UNESCO, 2020). The Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, on 9 January 2022, published a notice with seven urgent points for all educational institutions, and for the university, it instructed conducting predetermined semester and annual examinations of universities and educational institutes by arranging accommodation in a Z-shaped seating plan in compliance with public health and safety standards. Mandatory use of masks and sanitizers in examination centres and strict enforcement of the provision of physical distance (Ministry of Education, Science & Technology, 2022). In this scenario, media education in Nepal is facing challenges to be more pragmatic and technocratic, which is further emphasized by the unprecedented experience of the COVID-19 crisis.

Nepalese scholars focused their impact study related to the pandemic mainly on the topic of ICT in education. Pandey and Pokharel (2025) studied the impact of digital divides on media education in Nepal during the COVID-19 pandemic from the educator's perspective. They used Van Dijk's (2005) digital divide framework, and the result reveals that disparities in motivation, access, and digital skills among educators in Nepal significantly influenced media education during the Covid-19 crisis, emphasizing the need for multifaceted interventions to improve online teaching outcomes. Niroula (2021) conducted a study to measure educational development and, therefore, professional development in terms of ICT skills and their use in their virtual classroom during the pandemic. The finding of the study was that a large number of teachers augmented their ICT skills and used them frequently during the pandemic, whereas the same participants did not use ICT applications frequently to teach in their classrooms before the pandemic. Teachers' use of ICT tools in such remote areas indicates that teachers had to go through intensive learning during the pandemic.

Khadka (2022) conducted participatory action research during COVID-19 with 40 higher secondary level students in online learning of the English language through Google Meet using Roger's theory of innovation. She observed the behaviour change from initial reluctance to join online class with added audiovisual material to inquisitiveness, with increased participation resulting in gradual improvement in English language skills, including writing. Health crises caused by epidemics have enforced academic institutions to initiate an alternative way to continue the educational classes, but for developing countries such as Nepal, the teachers and students may suffer from multiple problems such as socioeconomic challenges, technological problems, literacy backgrounds, etc., which may act as barriers to the newly employed online techniques (Chaudhary et al., 2022). These studies demanded further research to explore the impact on multi-faceted areas of the overall education system in Nepal.

Research Methodology

This study was conducted using mixed research methodologies, using both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. Qualitative in-depth interview method and quantitative survey method were used to obtain the data because student experiences through quantitative surveys and the complex institutional viewpoints of faculty and staff through qualitative in-depth interviews justified the mixed methodology used in this study. While the quantitative data provides quantifiable

comparisons between public and private institutions, the qualitative approach enhanced contextual understanding. A more comprehensive and reliable analysis of media education practices in various academic contexts was done by combining the two approaches.

Using purposive non-probability sampling, two colleges were chosen for the study. College names are coded as JMC and DMC. Among the two sampled educational institutions, JMC was a public college located in the eastern part of Nepal in Koshi Province, and DMC was a private college located in the capital city, Kathmandu, in Bagmati Province. The rationale behind taking these colleges as samples is that they were not only different from the ownership pattern, but also because of their location. It had implied the emic approach, as in both institutions, researchers have been appointed as tenured faculty, yet have maintained a neutral position by collecting data from research participants objectively.

In-depth interviews were conducted among the administrative staff and lecturers. A survey was conducted among students of both private and public colleges. Students were surveyed with close-ended, intensive 25 questions. Seventy-two students of journalism and mass communication from the first to the fourth year of their bachelor's participated in the survey, among whom 32 were from public college and 40 were from private College. The survey was done in a blended method, with public college students participating through online surveys using Google Forms and private college students participating through paper-based surveys. The same questionnaires were used in both online and paper-based surveys.

The data from in-depth interviews were presented in tabulated form. Tabulation was done using thematic categories with coded variables. Survey data were expressed in descriptive statistics percentages. Data analysis was done through the interpretation of the in-depth interview and descriptive analysis of surveys.

Data Presentation and Analysis

For data analysis, three areas are categorized as follows:

1. Administrative experience
2. Media Educators' experience
3. Media students' experience

These categories have tabulated data, which has been analyzed from three lenses: ICT in education, digital literacy, and digital inequality.

1.   **Administrative experience**

    Table 1

    The thematic categorization of data obtained from interviews with administrators

Thematic Categories	Public college	Private college
Major Management issues during COVID-19	Digital Literacy	Financial
Student Enrollment	Low	Low
Student Grievances	Financial and Technical	Financial
Online Class Management	Difficult due to low digital literacy	Easy due to high digital literacy
Fee Collection	Difficult (two months fee was discounted)	Difficult (Six months fee was discounted)
Funding	Local Government (20 Lakh as reparation for using college building for quarantine) Regular University Grant Commission fund	None
Salary Distribution	Regular	Obstructed
Course Delivery	Timely completion yet had to arrange physical revision class for those students who were unable to participate in online class	Timely completion
Support from Lecturers	Regular and strong	Obstructed
Exam Management (Internal and Board)	- Internal exams were taken online - Physical exam following Ministry of Education Guidelines, - The exam centre was same college for board exams	- Internal exams were taken online - The exam centre was another college for board exams
Emergency Decision-Making	Board of Directors meeting the administration meeting was mandatory to take decision as per college constitution, so it was difficult	The founder took major decisions and informed other members, so it was easy

    Note: Based on responses to questions developed to know administrative experience during COVID-19 while running media education-related courses by private and public colleges

2.   Media educators' experience

Table 2

The thematic categorization of data obtained from the interview

Thematic categories	Public college	Private college
Comprehension of the sudden shift during COVID-19	Challenging due to technical resources	Challenging due to financial insecurity
Teaching methodology and material	Lecture based on PowerPoint presentation	A blend of lecture based on PowerPoint presentations and projects
Student's participation	Low due to technical reasons	Low due to reluctance to pay fee
Board exam results	Satisfactory, then expected	Better than expected
Obstacles in online teaching	Technical issues	Student reluctance and technical issues
Demerits of media education during an emergency situation	1. Financial burden for internet data during electricity cutout 2. Teaching practical project	1. Financial burden for internet data during electricity cut-out 2. No timely payment of salary
Merits of media education during an emergency situation	Increased Digital Literacy	A close connection with administration and students due to constant communication

Note: Based on responses to questions developed to know media educators' experience of teaching online classes during COVID-19 in private and public colleges.

3.   Media students' experience

Table 3

The thematic categorization of data obtained from a survey with media students

Thematic Categories	Public College	Private College
Pre-COVID-19 online class experience	19% students among a total of 32 students	22**%** students among a total of 40 students
Online class participation	51% students among a total of 32 students	35% students among a total of 40 students
Internet Accessibility	53% students among a total of 32 students	82% students among a total of 40 students
Use of Device	90% joined from mobile, 12% laptop and 10% computer were used by students among a total of 32 students	52% mobile, 45% laptop and 3% computer were the devices used by students among a total of 40 students
Apps used for online class	Zoom, Teams and Google Meet	Zoom, Teams and Google Meet
Difficulties	Technical and Financial	Technical and Financial
Assignment Submission	Visiting College Administration, teaching learning app, email and social media	Email and social media
Sources to obtain information related to class	Bulk messaging, social media, email, app notification, phone	Social media, email, app notification
Internal and Board Exam Results	30% improved, 35% negative and 35% neutral responses were given by students among a total of 32 students from three batches.	30% improved, 35% negative and 35% neutral response by students among a total of 40 students of three batch
Availability of digital resources	Increased	Increased
Long- and short-term effects	Both kinds of effect on socialization, habit and academic journey	Both kinds of socialization, habit and academic journey

Note.: *Based on a survey conducted to know media educators' experience of teaching online classes during COVID-19 in private and public colleges*

Significant differences were observed in the impact of COVID-19 on media-related course delivery management between the public and private colleges at the administrative level. A major reason behind it was the technical and financial. Private college was technically resourceful but financially vulnerable, whereas public college had the support of the University Grants Commission as well as local government financially, but was technologically vulnerable due to low digital literacy and a significant digital divide among the staff as well as students. Decision-making was easier for private college administrators, whereas public college was not easier due to the provisions of constant meetings among the board of directors as well as administrators to take major decisions. Student enrolment in both colleges has decreased after the COVID-19 experience.

Differences were in how they perceived the COVID-19 challenge by public and private college media educators. Public college lecturers faced technical difficulties, whereas private college lecturers faced job insecurities and financial difficulties. Teaching methodologies and materials were also quite different, as public college lecturers focused on lecturing based on PowerPoint presentations, whereas private college lecturers used project-based teaching too. Teaching practical skills through projects was difficult for lecturers at public colleges, whereas irregular salary was a major challenge for those at private colleges. Lecturers at public colleges pointed out that the merit of COVID-19 in media education was that it increased digital literacy, whereas private college lecturers viewed that the major merit was the increased volume of interaction among administration, lecturers, and students. They also shared similar experiences regarding increased expenses in mobile data due to power cuts. Educators from both colleges agreed that the results of the board exam were better than expected.

Both types of college students choose similar answers to questions which are thematically categorized as pre-COVID-19 online class participation, uses of apps, availability of digital resources, long- and short-term effects regarding socialization, habit and academic journeys, and internal and board exam involvement and results. Students' answers were different for public and private colleges in questions that are thematically categorized as the difference between online class participation during

COVID-19, internet accessibility, use of devices, and assignment submission. Public college students lacked technical resources, but still they managed to participate, whereas private college students remained reluctant to take classes though they had technical resources.

The COVID-19 experience had changed the perspective of administrators, media educators, and students significantly regarding the use of ICT, tracing the level of digital literacy and experiencing the digital divide in both private and public colleges. From student enrolment to class management and the execution of internal and final exams management, administration had struggled on various levels. Media educators from both public and private colleges were compelled to rethink their career choices due to decreased enrollment in the journalism and mass communication department. Students' reluctance to participate in online media education and pro-dropping-out college attitudes due to financial reasons in private colleges was witnessed, which can be damaging in the long run for both the student and the institution. Even in public college, students were left out for a significant amount of time from online classes due to the digital divide and lack of digital literacy.

There was a significant difference based on ownership pattern in student enrolment, teachers' qualification and dedication, investment and resource generation, as well as educational goals. Public colleges got financial support as donations and funds from governmental, non-governmental, and private sectors, besides fee collection from students. On the other hand, a private college is vulnerable financially, as it depends mostly on students' fees. The private sector also generated employment opportunities for a significant number of human resources. That is why the chances of job loss increase during a crisis when there is no intervention program to navigate it through a policy mechanism. Upadhyaya (2020) researched the impact of COVID-19 on workers and employment in Nepal, where he states that

> The number of private colleges is more than 1500, of which 1085 are associated with Tribhuvan University. TU has its own 61 colleges nationwide with 7,920 university teachers and 8,094 administrative staff, where a few from nearly 1,200 part-timers are the income losers. The teachers and staff, mainly in private colleges, have lost income, though many of them are part-timers having full-time jobs elsewhere.

Public colleges had to deal with a large number of students, whereas private colleges have a smaller number of students, which makes the administrative experience significantly different. Students were expecting to get fee waivers and regular classes with good results during COVID-19. Pedagogical performance was determined by educational goals that were compelled to realign, adapting to the new technology as well as digital resources.

The qualitative data from interviews with administrators and educators provided in-depth insights into the distinct institutional, financial, and pedagogical challenges faced by public and private colleges during the pandemic. These findings aligned with the quantitative survey data from students, which highlighted differences in access, participation, and outcomes across ownership patterns, confirming the patterns identified in the qualitative analysis. Together, both data sets complemented each other by offering a holistic view of how digital inequalities shaped media education experiences during COVID-19 in Nepal.

Findings and Conclusion

From the study among college administrations and the media educators, and surveys with the students, the following findings have been derived.

i.   Private colleges faced major financial setbacks, which brought reluctance to participate in academic programs among administrators, educators, and students despite having digital literacy.

ii.   Public colleges received economic support from the University Grant Commission and local government, yet faced challenges in initiating remote classes among financially disadvantaged and digitally disconnected students.

iii. Digital inequalities among both kinds of colleges surfaced very clearly during the pandemic, impacting the administrative and pedagogical performances.

iv.   Both types of colleges faced major challenges in delivering the required skills for the practical part of the media-related courses.

Colleges were not prepared in terms of resources and digital skills to shift online in emergencies like a global pandemic. Students didn't have devices and WiFi to

connect with the online classes. Managing finances was another major crisis, as it was difficult to convince parents to pay for online classes. On the other hand, there was no clear government policy or stance on it, but some irresponsible statements in the media created an anti-education environment, and without fee collection, it was difficult to provide salaries to teachers and console them by providing institutional support, which would help them stay strong. Colleges learnt by facing the problem and taking initiative with the approach of learning by doing. Within an academic year, they found different ways to make themselves financially viable.

The primary lesson educational institutions learnt was how to have their digital presence in the learning platform and how to do effective teaching, ensuring the capacity development of students and achieving the overall goals of the organization. Students were slowly convinced and came out of the haze of the traditional school system, and were ready to pay; this slowly gave confidence to the teachers that they would get paid and would not be left unemployed. Government policies and strategies are necessary to deal with the situation. As per the above concepts, across the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic turned everyone's life upside down. Most governments temporarily closed academic institutions. The pandemic laid bare the difficulties of distance learning and reaching and teaching students in a crisis.

Post-pandemic emergency to accelerate education and economic recovery and address gross health disparities, the need has surfaced to reinvent the education sector to be vigilant and flexible to cope with disaster situations. This experience has made digital inequities among public and private colleges in Nepal more visible. Lecturers had turned to a wide array of platforms to connect with and continue to educate their students via Learning Management Systems (LMS), video conferencing, emails, Tele-classes, and radio. Teaching and learning during a pandemic were important, but health, safety, and well-being were the priority. College administration staff and lecturers operated with an understanding of the complexities of home lives and the mental, emotional, and financial management and physical difficulties their communities are facing. Many teachers were unprepared for adopting new technologies. Administrators and teachers worried that their training, including programs that offer degrees, has not sufficiently equipped them with the skills to incorporate digital technologies into classrooms and curricula. However, teachers, who have already moved to more student-centered, technologically fueled (not driven) teaching and

learning, are leading the way. Students also tried to adapt from both kinds of colleges in the process of running programs smoothly when the lockdown stretched.

From this research, preparedness for the crisis situation in media education and related problems are highlighted. The status of ICT in media education, the level of digital literacy, and the digital divide even in media education are traced with the primary data. A limitation of this study is that it focuses only on the impact of the pandemic on media education at affiliated colleges of Tribhuvan University. Future research can be about the long-term and short-term effects of the crisis situation, like COVID-19. It will provide insights to the educators, administrators, and students regarding preparedness to tackle crises. Despite incorporating digital skills, media education faced challenges in running classes smoothly during crises, indicating the need for further research in other fields and disciplines.

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