



Bridging the Digital Divide: Digital Media Literacy among College Students in Nepal

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Abstract

Digital literacy includes a wide range of concepts that feature different meanings and the ability to use digital tools and applications, examining digital media literacy among college students and its impact on the access disparity. The objective of the study was to enable students to effectively utilize digital tools and comprehend the benefits and responsibilities associated with being informed consumers. A quantitative methodology was employed, gathering data via a survey and closed-ended questionnaire from a sample of 106 undergraduate students in the Humanities and Social Sciences studying at Kailali Multiple Campus. The survey assesses students' opinions on digital media literacy, emphasizing the utilization of digital tools and the acknowledgment of the necessity to be informed, involved and responsible. The results show that 53.8% of participants view media literacy as an essential analytical ability, 61.2% rely on search engine optimization to find resources as the most reliable source, 70.2% access digital content via mobile devices, and 45.6% consider digital citizenship an important aspect of digital literacy. The results explore how teaching digital literacy can help close these gaps and guarantee that people's daily lives include access to digital skills. The findings of the study suggest improving students' ability to locate, evaluate, synthesize and use information in practical situations.

Keywords: Analytical skill, leveraging digital devices, digital citizenship, search engine optimization

Introduction

The integration of media, navigation resources and digital technologies in educational systems is crucial for bridging the digital divide and providing students with the digital literacy needed for active engagement in the knowledge economy.



Digital literacy is crucial for youth, as it provides them with important insights into security, privacy and online safety. Grasping these concepts enables them to be more equipped to recognize and tackle risks like cyberbullying and different online safety concerns. Digital literacy is crucial in today's world, as it involves navigating digital tools and understanding complex concepts. In contrast, "digital disparity" highlights the gap between those who can effectively use technology—like computers and the internet—and those who cannot. Addressing this gap is essential for ensuring equal opportunities in our digital society. Those who have access to technology and those who do not, the term "digital divide" describes the difference.

Nepal has a significant digital divide, especially in the area of education, as claimed by Srivastava (2023). Critical thinking abilities are taught by media literacy, which enables people to assess the authority and dependability of information found online. This disparity between the different income levels, which transcends demographic characteristics like age, sex, and education, can exist within countries, in both urban and rural areas. Deussen and Dijk (2011) determined the term "digital gap," which originally referred to the differences in access to computers. As the internet quickly spread throughout society and became a major form of computing, the term expanded to cover deficiencies in both computers and internet availability.

Many advanced and developing nations are working to create and enhance e-government systems in order to efficiently provide public services. Ability to determine effective access, use, and generation of information. Your interactions with other users and content are in a critical, sensitive, ethical way, reflectively, and ensure that they are responsible for operations in online and ICT environments and achieve that right (UNESCO, 2018). The objective of this study is to improve students' ability to locate, evaluate, synthesize, and utilize information in everyday situations. Experienced digital skills are essential for students to access academic resources, collaborate effectively and meet the requirements of modern work. The goal of media literacy education is to change traditional education into a new way of "seeing," and research in this area aims to support that idea (Rowe, 2018).

The government of Nepal must also deal with the challenge of striking a balance between gathering information and protecting individuals' privacy. Digital media literacy fosters the ability to use and create technologies that contribute to social and economic well-being. It encompasses grasping the effects of modern technologies on society, being adept at managing digital identities appropriately, and possessing the skills to locate, organize, understand, assess, analyze, and produce digital information (Hobbs, 2010). Traditional definitions of media literacy competency included skills linked to access and consumption, as well as an emphasis on media message interpretation. This digital skills gap is essential since increased digital proficiency is closely related to improved academic performance. Students who can effectively

use online learning resources are more likely to obtain successful outcomes. The lack of reliable high-speed internet in rural places exacerbates the digital divide as a reality, stifling the development of crucial digital literacy skills among university-level students when compared to their urban peers.

By giving people a voice in the digital sphere and promoting greater diversity and representation, media literacy empowers people and can aid in closing the digital gap. It is indisputable that the digital divide is caused by unequal access to and usage of information. When considering believability, first inquire about the author's identity. What is the purpose behind this message? How was it built? These questions allow people to determine the credibility of a statement. The effective use of digital information enhances the ability to verify facts and compare sources of information. Being proficient with technology is not only advantageous in the current digital era but also necessary for both academic success and deep connections. Regrettably, a growing digital divide highlights the glaring disparities in people's access to technology and digital literacy. To guarantee that everyone can engage in the digital world equitably, this study explores university students' levels of digital literacy in great detail and identifies important gaps that need to be filled. By drawing attention to these differences, we support the necessary reforms that advance inclusivity and provide every student the tools they need to succeed in a society that is becoming more interconnected by the day. To lessen the digital divide, the project intends to investigate how enhancing digital literacy can be a tactic.

Literature Review

Media literacy provides individuals with the abilities to effectively utilize digital platforms such as social media, online news sources, and communication tools. It improves digital literacy by facilitating better access to, analysis of, evaluation of, and creation of digital content. Conversely, the digital divide refers to the inequalities in access to digital technologies, which are influenced by economic, geographical, and educational factors. Abu-Fadil (2016) contends that higher education in Arab countries lacks the necessary infrastructure and support for digital media literacy, a perspective echoed by Melki and Maaliki (2016), who highlight resistance from traditional academics. Similarly, Adhikari (2024) notes that Nepal's National Broadband Policy seeks to increase internet connectivity, particularly in rural regions.

Levin (2010) argues that merely providing computers in educational institutions does not guarantee digital literacy. There remains uneven access to broadband internet across different regions (Eysenbach & Kohler, 2002). Berry and Wintle (2009) discovered that media literacy improves students' critical thinking skills and memory, whereas Fox (2006) noted that users often experience confusion when searching

for health information online. Bhattarai (2017) discusses Nepal's 2017 election agenda, which includes initiatives such as smart cities and the development of digital infrastructure. Research indicates that the digital divide now encompasses disparities in skills, extending beyond mere access to technology. Conteh et al. (2015) highlight the importance of using ICT to promote efficient and transparent governance, but Poudyal et al. (2017) contend that Nepal's inadequate infrastructure hampers the effectiveness of e-government initiatives.

Security issues also influence the level of trust in ICT within Nepal (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2009). Ottenstein and Mainali (2022) indicate that approximately 80% of Nepal's rural residents have limited digital literacy and infrastructure, which exacerbates the digital divide between rural and urban areas. Digital platforms such as Hello Sarkar demonstrate progress in ICT-driven governance. Data Reportal (2023) reports that 49.6% of the population in Nepal are internet users, with 43.5% actively engaging on social media. The Oxford Internet Institute (2020) emphasizes the necessity of bridging the digital divide to promote fair development and warns about the dangers of social media manipulation. Ojha (2023) expresses concerns regarding Clause 11.25 of the National Internet Gateway provision, which was not included in the 2021 cybersecurity draft, suggesting a move towards greater government control. The National Broadband Policy 2014 outlines a plan to revolutionise education through ICT.

In Nepal, the 2014 National Broadband Policy (2071 BS) seeks to enhance education by encouraging online learning and the use of various communication technologies. It aims to increase access to education, particularly in remote regions, by expanding high-speed internet connectivity, which supports digital classrooms and distance education. The policy also promotes the incorporation of digital tools into the curriculum to create more interactive and adaptable learning experiences. The use of platforms such as video conferencing and online lectures helps improve teaching quality and student participation, while also facilitating teacher training and access to international resources, thereby increasing the effectiveness and reach of Nepal's education system.

Methods and Procedures

This study used a quantitative approach to assess digital media literacy among students to overcome the digital gap. 106 students were selected as sample sizes using a narrow, structured questionnaire to assess access to digital resources, skills, and models. In other words, it contains detailed information on how data is collected, defining some important tools or tools used (e.g., exams, group discussions, interviews, experiments, and observations). He also explains how participants or sources of data

are chosen (e.g., random samples, target samples, etc.) and first displays the sample and study justification. Data collected via online Google RSVP forms was analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to summarize and describe the demographic profiles of respondents. This study focuses on understanding the digital gap among university students and aims to reduce it by improving digital skills. This research seeks to explore the government's policies and legal structures that target narrowing the digital divide between urban and rural areas. The aim is to investigate how improving digital literacy can reduce the digital gap. Furthermore, this study examines how limited technical resources and a lack of digital skills affect students' ability to identify relevant trends.

Results and Discussion

This research, carried out through a structured survey at Kailali Multiple Campus with 106 participants using Google Forms, adopts a bilingual approach in English and Nepali to promote clarity and inclusivity among students. The results clearly demonstrate that basic operational and formal internet skills alone are inadequate for navigating the complex digital landscape of today. To actively participate in the information society, individuals need advanced skills in information management and strategic internet use. The study highlights that digital literacy gaps are closely linked to educational background and cognitive abilities, pointing to the urgent need for further academic investigation. While previous efforts to bridge the digital divide focused on providing physical access to technology, the current challenge is to equip people with the digital skills necessary for meaningful participation. Media literacy initiatives must now focus on ensuring equitable access and developing skills, particularly in underserved and marginalised areas.

According to Data Reportal (2024), Nepal has 37.47 million active mobile connections, representing 120.6% of the population, which indicates that simply having access does not eliminate digital inequality; differences in digital skills still exist. The study shows that closing the digital gap in higher education requires specific efforts to improve digital literacy. The data indicate that 70.2% of students have access to digital devices, and 53.8% possess confidence and analytical skills in using advanced digital technologies. These students are not only able to access digital content but also engage with it critically, demonstrating their capacity to evaluate, interpret, and respond to media thoughtfully. The survey results, supported by quantitative data and relevant literature, provide strong evidence of the increasing importance of digital literacy in influencing academic achievement and preparing students for the challenges of the modern workforce.

Table 1*Media Literacy Skills Distribution and Understanding Levels*

Media Literacy Understanding	Response Frequency (N)	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Analyzing skills	57	53.8	53.8	53.8
Abstracting	4	3.7	3.7	57.5
Commenting or sharing	29	27.4	27.4	84.9
Evaluating contents	16	15.1	15.1	100.0
Total	106	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 1 shows that a high percentage of skill analysis (53.8%) is the most frequently associated factor in media literacy. This suggests that critical thinking and evaluation of media content is an important ability. Which suggests that most respondents are confident in their ability to critically analyze media content. This indicates the ability to critically examine media content, understand its purpose, and interpret its messages. Comments and sharing (27.4%) received moderate responses, indicating that a small but significant portion of respondents are actively involved in the media through comments and sharing. Similarly, the rating (15.1%) received the lowest percentage, assuming they were confident in their ability to assess media content trust and bias. Since abstraction (3.7%) is the least recognized factor, this means that quantities and interpretations are not important for the literary of the media. These data indicate that media readability is mainly considered to be the ability to critically analyze the content of the media and not just to share it or summarize it.

Table 2*Digital Platform Selection Criteria*

Selection Criteria	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Friend engagement	9	8.5	8.5	8.5
Content quality	57	53.8	53.8	62.3
TRP and market access	12	11.3	11.3	73.6
Own knowledge	28	26.4	26.4	100.0
Total	106	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 2 reflects the high percentage of the quality of the content (53.8%) is the most important factor when choosing a digital platform, stressing that users determine the priorities of content values. Most respondents suggest that they are confident in their quality and their ability to choose reliable media content. This demonstrates the ability to critically study media content, understand its goals, and interpret messages. Another option, own knowledge (26.4%), is the second most influential factor, assuming that

individual exams play an important role. Likewise, TRP and market access (11.3%) have a certain influence, which indicates commercial and professional considerations. Since the involvement of a friend of the fourth version (8.5%) is the least recognized factor, which implies that it is the least influential and shows that social ties are not the main reason for the choice of the platform. This suggests that users determine the priorities of high-quality content compared to social influence and market trends in the choice of a digital platform.

Table 3

Most Trusted Digital Platforms

Digital Platform	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Facebook	30	28.3	28.3	28.3
TikTok	1	0.9	0.9	29.2
Instagram	9	8.5	8.5	37.7
Search Engine Optimization	66	62.3	62.3	100.0
Total	106	100.0	100.0	100.0

To interpret the data shown in Table 3, it shows that search optimization as a significant margin shows the most reliable platform for searching for resources, and 62.3% of respondents choose it as a reliable source, assuming that search engines (Google, Bing, etc.) are the main source For reliable information. Social platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, are trusted much less when it comes to searching for resources, and Facebook occupies a relatively large share among them. However, Facebook (28.3%) is probably the second most trusted platform, probably because of community recommendations and shared content. Instagram (8.5%) shows that confidence is limited and finding reliable resources is not the main source. TikTok (0.9%) is the least reliable, indicating that short video content is not considered a reliable resource for information. These data suggest that although users are largely based on search engine optimization for correct information, social media platforms are considered an additional source.

Table 4

Factors Determining Digital Media Contents

Factor	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Users engagement & gratification	25	24.0	24.0	24.0

Factor	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Language & encoding techniques	29	26.9	26.9	50.9
Context & mass ideology	48	45.2	45.2	96.1
Virility & trendiness	4	3.9	3.9	100.0
Total	106	100.0	100.0	100.0

As depicts in Table 4, the Context and Mass Ideology (45.2%) is considered the most important factor affecting digital media content, which is the most influential factor in shaping digital media content. Followed by language & encoding techniques (26.9%), which also play a significant role in determining digital media content factors. The third version of users with interaction and satisfaction (24%) has important influences with minimal fashion (3.9%) with courage and efficiency, but that is a short-term trend; it is of an ideological or broader context. These data demonstrate that users trust the context and popular ideology, as well as the fact that language and coding methods are considered additional factors.

Table 5

Digital Media Literacy Content Perception Factors

Perception Factor	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Self-reflection through contents	40	38.1	38.1	38.1
Continuous learning	22	21.0	21.0	59.1
Trending culture	10	9.5	9.5	68.6
Fact-checking & authentic sourcing	33	31.4	31.4	100.0
Total	106	100.0	100.0	100.0

As shown in Table 5, the option to highly evaluate self-reflection through content to measure digital media literacy (38.1%) is the most common option to measure digital media literacy. This is the most used approach, while continuous training (21%) at the same time plays a key role in training content recognition in digital media. Because the culture of trends (9.5%) has the least impact on the way people measure digital literacy. These data show that self-reflection in content selection is a major factor and that validation of authentic facts and sources plays an important role in measuring perception.

Table 6
Major Indicators of Digital Media Literacy

Indicators	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Digital citizenship	48	45.2	45.2	45.2
Informed consensus	25	24.0	24.0	69.2
Setting social narratives	20	19.2	19.2	88.4
Safeguarding self	12	11.5	11.5	100.0
Total	106	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 6 shows that digital citizenship (45.2%) is the main indicator of digital literacy. Enlightened consensus (24%) is the second most important factor. The installation of social narratives (19.2%) also plays a role. Safeguarding self (11.5%) has the lowest effect on the perception of digital literacy. This is how digital citizenship indicates that every citizen should be digitally literate to enhance informed consensus in general.

Table 7
Understanding of Fact-Checking and Verification Process

Understanding of Fact-Checking	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Confirmation bias	13	12.4	12.4	12.4
Protect user's rights	7	6.6	6.6	19.0
Encourage safer online environment	21	20.0	20.0	39.0
All of the above	65	61.0	61.0	100.0
Total	106	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 7 illustrates that most respondents (61%) include all aspects of facts and verification (user rights and online environment entry) (20%). 12.4% of respondents highlighted the role of bias in confirmation in information verification. Protection of user rights (6.6%) is the least recognized aspect. This result shows that the main determinant of digital content is factual verification and corresponds to its authenticity.

Table 8*Technology Preference regarding Collecting or Gathering Information*

Technology Preference	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Mobile phone	74	70.2	70.2	70.2
Laptop	14	13.5	13.5	83.7
Desktop computer	1	0.9	0.9	84.6
If any	17	15.4	15.4	100.0
Total	106	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 8 reflects that mobile phones (70.2%) are the most preferred tools for collecting information. This illustrates the dominant role in the consumption of digital media. Laptops (13.5%) act as an alternative, but are far less used than mobile phones. Office computers (0.9%) are the least used, highlighting a decrease in information relevance. 15.4% of respondents prefer affordable equipment and flexibility demonstrated in use. This suggests that mobile phones are the main tool for consuming digital content, stressing their importance in the availability of modern information.

Conclusion

This research offers valuable insights into the changing landscape of digital literacy among university students in Nepal, highlighting that simply having access to technology is no longer enough. The clear personal takeaway from this study is that there is a significant gap not only in access but also in the ability to critically and effectively utilize digital tools, especially among students from less privileged backgrounds. Despite the widespread use of smartphones and internet connectivity, with 70.2% of respondents reporting access, deficiencies in skills remain a major concern. The study's contribution lies in its empirical investigation of how digital literacy impacts the broader digital divide within higher education. By examining 106 university students, the research provides concrete data on differences in usage habits, critical thinking skills, digital citizenship, and trust in digital content, such as SEO-based information. These results underscore the importance of incorporating structured digital literacy training into academic programs. Drawing on theories of the digital divide and media literacy, particularly the second-level digital divide theory—which focuses on differences in digital skills beyond mere access—the findings reinforce that digital literacy encompasses not only operational skills but also strategic, evaluative, and ethical engagement with digital content. The implications for the future are significant, as educational policymakers, curriculum designers, and government bodies

can use this study to develop targeted digital literacy initiatives. Such programs should be designed to address both technical skills and critical thinking, especially in rural and marginalized communities where digital inequalities are most evident.

It is advisable to develop comprehensive and inclusive digital literacy programs that focus on critical thinking, safe internet use, digital citizenship, and essential IT skills for individuals of all ages. To address the rural-urban digital gap, priority should be given to rural and marginalized communities by providing targeted resources and training tailored to their specific digital needs. Incorporating media and digital literacy as mandatory parts of university curricula is essential to prepare students with the skills necessary for success in an increasingly digital academic and professional landscape. As reliance on digital technology increases, cybersecurity education must be enhanced by raising awareness about privacy, data protection, and safe online behavior to ensure a secure digital environment for everyone. The 2015 ICT Policy, which includes 80 actionable strategies, should be actively implemented and regularly reviewed to promote sustainable and inclusive digital literacy development throughout Nepal. In summary, bridging the digital divide in Nepal's higher education requires not only infrastructure improvements but also a fundamental shift towards cultivating informed, critically engaged, and digitally proficient citizens. Collaboration among educational institutions, the government, and civil society is crucial to ensure equitable and responsible digital participation for all.

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