

# From Screens to Streets: Role of Digital Literacy and Misinformation in Shaping Democratic Participation in Nepal

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## Abstract

*The rapid increase in the growth of digital spaces in Nepal has transformed how the citizens engage with democracy, at the same time intensifying the dissemination of misinformation, which demeans the notion of informed citizenship and electoral confidence. This qualitative research paper will examine how Nepalese citizens employ soft power through phenomenology and in-depth interviews. Four major themes came out; Digital Literacy in Situated Competence, Political Content Understanding, Misinformation and Democratic Trust, and Informal Misinformation Detection Strategies. The findings imply that digital literacy is contingent due to gender pay gaps, barriers or sociocultural practices, informal learning as opposed to formal education. Participants relied on trusted social networks to confirm the validity of political information and tended to respond emotionally to political information. Whereas misinformation diminished trust which ultimately leads to political apathy or excessive polarization; communities turned into flexible means of recognizing lies. This study also highlights the need to community-based civic education, tougher policies on platform responsibility, and culture-sensitive online literacy education to create resilience through democracy.*

**Keywords:** Democratic participation, digital literacy, misinformation, Nepal, political communication, social media

## Introduction

As digital technologies are growing, democratic engagement has transformed the way citizens obtain political information, formulate views, and take part in civic activities. The growing access to mobile and internet, the platforms of Facebook, TikTok, Youtube and X (previously Twitter) are vital in political communication in developing democracies such as Nepal (Regmi, 2024). They offer a platform through which citizens can air out issues, organize themselves, and bring them into contact with the institutions of local governance. However, misinformation, which distorts perceptions, voting, and trust in democratic institutions, is also amplified more through these platforms, and, in many cases, misinformation is spread more rapidly than verifiable news due to algorithmic amplification (Tufekci, 2017; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

In Nepal, entrenched sociopolitical variants in the past, socioeconomic disparity, and inconsistent levels of education make for an even greater exposure and risk to digital misrepresentation. Although digital access is increasing in Nepal, many citizens lack the cognitive skills to recognize fake online content (Chetty et al., 2018). Digital misrepresentation will involve political misinformation. In recent years, most especially in cases of an election, fake videos, hoaxes, and fake headlines have been distributed because of deepfakes, claims that have not been verified, and misleading headlines, which is putting the capacity of citizens to engage in democracy in an informed manner at risk (Jungherr, 2025).

Media Literacy Theory and Habermas's understanding of the public sphere reveal how digital misrepresentation poses many unique challenges. For citizens to assess online material, they must possess cognitive capabilities and ethical skills (Livingstone, 2004), while algorithm-based and fragmented online spaces challenge citizens to engage with discourses that are rational and inclusive and that do not replicate previous patterns of fragmentation or polarization (Pane, 2025; Tufekci, 2017). The main question in Nepal with respect to these considerations is not just whether citizens have digital access, but who can accurately tell fact from fiction when faced with both increasing social and educational disparities.

Although these issues are evidently important, research concerning Nepal is relatively sparse and overwhelmingly quantitative, with a focus on discussions of access and use, but pays little to no attention to how people understand and interact with political misinformation. The current study bridges that gap with qualitative research on the political lives of Nepali citizens and the process of their negotiation of digital literacy and political misinformation. It attempts to provide contextually relevant implications on theory, policy, and practice in Nepal and other Global South locations.

This research seeks to explore the practices of digital literacy among various demographics, comprehend how people describe their experiences in interpreting political content in the online format, to evaluate how misinformation has influenced democratic trust and participation, examine informal practices to detect or counter misinformation, and to evaluate social and cultural factors that render people vulnerable to the digital space. These aims will bring this research to the crossroad of media studies, political communication, and democratic research, a convergence that brings out the necessity of people-centered conceptualization of democracy and the digital environment.

## Literature Review

### *Digital Literacy in the Age of Disinformation: Concepts, Theories, and Evolution*

Digital literacy as a concept has changed remarkably over the last thirty years, moving from simply technical competence to being necessary for civic engagement and civic competence in a digital world. It originated in the early 1980s and 1990s, focused on high-level technical capacities, in response to novel increased computerization (Gilster, 1997). With the internet starting to have a role in our information environment, as well as in our social lives, the literal concept of literacy has become too limited. The theoretical change in the discourses and conceptualizations of the idea of digital literacy took place in the early 2000s. Leaving the plain technical knowledge aside and focusing on cognitive, evaluative, and ethical deliberations of digital engagement (Livingstone, 2004; Eshet, 2004; Ng, 2012).

Digital literacy is now being defined as a more multifaceted concept that better suits current realities; It now includes, alongside technical competence, critical practices of interpreting messages, ethical participation in a digital environment, and meaningful contribution to the digital information environment. Eshet-Alkalai (2004) contributed to this developing notion with a timely contribution by outlining five dimensions of digital literacy - photo-visual literacy (to understand photo-visual forms), reproduction literacy (to reuse existing work), branching literacy (to navigate a non-linear system), information literacy (to critique the validity and usefulness of information) and socio-emotional literacy (to ethically and empathetically engage). This broader imagination is an indication of a paradigm shift in this meaning- the shift toward digital consumption to digital citizenship.

Media Literacy Theory is the underlying foundation for this reconceptualization, which shows that having access to digital technologies is only one part of “meaningful participation.” According to Wiest et al. (2025), doing something meaningful with media and technology requires a host of interpretive and critical skills, allowing for the analysis of content, detection of bias, detection of persuasion messages, and so on. This becomes critical in the era of algorithmically mediated information that, in many cases, functions without the realization of how participants’ attention is divided and conditioned by such analyses (Pariser, 2011). Also, the emergence of disinformation practices, echo chambers, and deepfakes technologies signifies the necessity of reflexive and political digital literacy, of digital literacy that questions predominant narratives and accepts existing power disparities on online platforms (Andrejevic, 2007).

The theoretical basis for this project is also informed by Jürgen Habermas’s Public Sphere Theory and the idea that rational and inclusive dialogue leads to a meaningful legitimation of democracy. Unlike information exchange and engagement in the public sphere, the fragmentation of the public sphere into micro-publics driven by algorithmic logic detracts from the principles of deliberative democracy. Sunstein (2017) warns against the emergence of the so-called information cocoons when a person receives only those pieces of information that do not contradict his/her past state but reject the cross-cutting data (Sunstein, 2017). Civics competencies like locating manipulation, resisting manipulation, etc., will also have to be incorporated in digital literacy.

Digital literacy, at least in Europe, is a core element of lifelong learning competence by the European Commission, which has highlighted the significance of digital literacy in defending democracy (Vrabec & Furtokova, 2024). This is the same case with the Global Media and Information Literacy (MIL) project of UNESCO, which frames digital literacy as an information age human right. But in most Global South societies, including South Asia, it does not seem to be linked and not funded to fit digital literacy into educational and governance systems (Amiri et al., 2025).

Structural inequities, including the digital divide between cities and rural areas, low literacy rates, gendered access to technologies, the absence of regulatory systems, and so on, can also pose a disadvantage to enhancing digital resilience in the South Asian context. In India, empirical research shows that marginalized populations and women will be the most marginalized in terms of digital literacy initiatives (Bansal & Choudhary, 2024). In the meantime, Nepal has also come up with digital literacy as a national focus in its National ICT Policy 2015, yet numerous initiatives have gradually been launched with mixed success (Gurung & Shrestha, 2023). Therefore, by defining digital literacy as simply a skill set, we lose the civic-imaginary possibilities of digital literacy as a political and epistemic practice to empower the people not only to access digital content, but to confront the forms of digital hegemony and take part in the democratic activities.

In terms of engaging with digital literacy, many young people in remote areas were formally engaged with digital literacy programming, although many only interacted with digital content through social media to obtain news, making them extremely susceptible to misinformation (Swart, 2023).

In addition, digital literacy in fragile democracies needs to be rooted in locally salient power dynamics. The lack of insertion of critical digital literacy into school curriculum, training for journalists, and citizenship education has enabled this problem to thrive rather than suggesting a strategy to counteract disinformation. Therefore, by defining digital literacy as simply a skill-set, we lose the civic-imaginary possibilities of digital literacy as a political and epistemic practice to empower the people not only to access digital content, but to confront the forms of digital hegemony and take part in democratic activities.

### ***Political Economy of Misinformation: Global and Regional Trends***

The political economy of digital communication is the origin of the worldwide dissemination of misinformation. Facebook and X (previously Twitter), YouTube, and TikTok are crafted to make money by selling user attention, with engagement mechanisms and algorithm amplification, where engagement is the maximization of user attention on a memorial of emotional experiences, which can be controversial and sensational (Tufekci, 2017; Guess et al., 2020). Studies have shown that false news travels faster, farther, and deeper than true news on sites such as Twitter, and the authors attributed it to novelty and emotional appeal (Vosoughi et al., 2018). The awareness of our attention commodified model made public misinformation more likely due to the dark and humus nature of these new communication modalities, thus establishing and legitimizing information misinformation as an entirely new, and completely profitable, dynamic.

With this design and behavior being evident in both political contexts, it must be noted that misinformation was standard both domestically and internationally; their misinformation campaigns influenced perceptions and debates in the 2016 presidential election, and continue to drive polarization through various means in 2020 (McMasters, 2020). In Brazil, health-related misinformation that spread on WhatsApp contributed to misinformation aversion and ultimately eroded public trust in institutions among citizens and communities when the COVID-19 pandemic hit (Silveira & Roazzi, 2025).

In the Global South, structurally vulnerable conditions enhance misinformation, including low digital literacy, high mobile penetration, weak regulatory oversight, and deep-rooted political divisions. In India, Chhibber and Verma (2018) recorded how WhatsApp emerged to be a major tool of propagating political propaganda, in which viral fake news is usually customized to caste, religious, or regional identities. In a study by Singh and Kumar (2024), it was reported that most youth in India use social media as a source of political news, and the social media is full of misinformation because of the lack of effective fact-checking systems. In Nigeria, Opaade (2025) described the role of misinformation that is mixed with the ethno-religious accounts in fueling electoral violence and inter-religious tension.

South Asia is one of the major players in the global misinformation ecosystem, with a quarter of the world's population. The linguistic diversity and the caste-ethnic conflicts in the region, as well as the unequal distribution of digital/elective infrastructure, provide an ideal environment for misinformation. Research has shown that there has been an increase in misinformation on social media in the countries of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, specifically in relation to elections, minority groups, and health epidemics (Ahmed, 2022; Yilmaz et al., 2022). In India, much of the misinformation in 2022 was politically motivated and directed toward Muslims and Dalits, meaning lower-class minorities (Amarasingam et al., 2022). In Bangladesh, government-backed cyber troops have engaged in tactics of misinformation to suppress dissent and word as propaganda or create the illusion of manipulation in the narratives of the public (Lacy & Mokherjee, 2020).

Nepal presents all these structural and political problems in a smaller capsule. The 2022 local elections also featured political parties making Facebook-sponsored posts and spreading false information about a candidate, policies, and results in unverified online sources. Nepal exhibits broader problems faced in the region, such as low levels of digital/media literacy, insufficient mechanisms of content moderation, and remapping of political polarization; vulnerabilities to misinformation act as reinforcements both in Nepal and South Asia overall.

The misinformation political economy of South Asia and Nepal is not an exception, which requires context-specific policies. Not only is this issue of personal media consumption, but also influenced by an uneven allocation of power, access, and regulation. Misinformation exploits identity politics, feeds on exhibitionism in case of low institutional trust, and is aggravated by the institutional and economic pressures of platform capitalism. Because of this reason, the policies that need to be developed to fight against misinformation must touch upon the technological architectures and structural socio-political relations.

### ***Empirical Review***

The empirical review offers a theoretically enhanced and multidimensional concept of how digital literacy influences, as well as is influenced by democratic engagement and misinformation in high- and low-income democratic settings. In cases, three main themes are present: the reconceptualization of digital literacy as interpretive and civic, the varying vulnerabilities of the users, and the systemic and identity-based character of the misinformation dissemination.

To begin with, a few pioneering publications (Livingstone, Ng and Derakhshan) believe that the focus on digital literacy as a technical skill should be changed. They rather focus on interpretive, ethical, and emotional aspects based on Multiliteracies Theory, Media Literacy Theory, and Information Literacy paradigms. The theoretical shift is essential to Nepal where formal educational initiatives on digital literacy are uncommon, and individuals become politically active on the Internet without state guidance. These observations justify the fundamental assumption of the present study, namely, that the digital literacy in Nepal needs to be approached as a type of civic infrastructure, situated, cultural, and informal, as opposed to a specific digital capability.

Second, empirical studies reveal deep socio-demographic disparities in digital literacy and misinformation vulnerability. Studies based in the U.S. show that misinformation negatively impacts older users and users with low levels of literacy disproportionately. Other works such as Chhibber and Verma (India) indicate that caste, ethnicity. These results indicate the need to clearly understand the how different Nepali communities read, resist or assimilate political misinformation and this study fills a gap in the literature.

Third, misinformation is not presented as a fortuitous side effect but as an objectively and socially fashioned one. Tufekci (Turkey) and Sunstein (USA) explain that platform algorithms boost the feelings of outrage and shield users in echo chambers of ideological purity. Farkas and Schou (Denmark) also give a stress on user agency to contribute to the production of misinformation in co-produced emotional interaction on the web. These revelations broaden the level of analysis of the study not just on the levels of individual literacy shortages but structural and discursive forces, such as algorithms and populist discourses, that influence digital political action in Nepal.

**Table 1**  
**Empirical Review**

<b>Author (s) and Country (s)</b>	<b>Theoretical Lens</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>Contribution to this Study</b>
Livingstone (2004); United Kingdom	Media Literacy Theory	Theoretical	Reframed digital literacy as including ethical, evaluative, and critical competencies beyond technical skill.	This study's framing of digital literacy as an interpretive practice, vital for studying political misinformation in Nepal.
Allcott and Gentzkow (2017); United States	Behavioral Economics	Quantitative (survey and behavioral)	Misinformation swayed voter opinion in the 2016 election; low digital literacy correlated with belief in falsehoods.	Supports the link between low digital literacy and democratic vulnerability, a key concern in rural Nepalese populations.
Guess et al. (2019); United States	Cognitive Psychology	Experimental and longitudinal survey	High digital literacy improved accuracy in judging online information; the elderly are most vulnerable.	Highlights age-based differences, applicable to Nepal's digitally diverse electorate.
Chhibber and Verma (2018), India	Political Communication Theory	Mixed Methods (quant and qual)	WhatsApp was instrumental in disseminating misinformation; messages appealed to religious and caste identities.	Resonates with Nepal's caste-based mobilizations and informal political messaging networks.
Farkas and Schou (2020), Denmark	Post-Truth & Critical Theory	Critical Discourse Analysis	Populist users co-create misinformation via online interactions; distrust in elites drives the spread.	Validates examining citizen agency in misinformation ecosystems, supports a qualitative approach in Nepal.

Tufekci (2017); Turkey	Platform Studies	Observational and platform critique	Algorithms amplify outrage; digital platforms reinforce misinformation through viral content logics.	Explains systemic amplification of fake news, applicable to Nepalese platforms like TikTok and Facebook.
Sunstein (2017); United States	Public Sphere Theory	Theoretical	Echo chambers isolate users from diverse views; personalization reinforces biases.	Key for analyzing digital fragmentation in Nepal's polarized political discourse.
Ng (2012)	Multiliteracies Theory	Theoretical and applied model	Proposed a tripartite digital literacy model: technical, cognitive, and socio-emotional literacies.	Justifies a multidimensional analytical lens
Poudel (2022); Nepal	Information Literacy Theory	Quantitative survey	Only 22% of users could cross-check sources; the lowest literacy was in provinces 6 and 7.	Empirical basis for studying informal verification and coping strategies in digitally weak provinces.
Chaudhary and Aryal (2021); Nepal	Civic Engagement Theory	Qualitative interviews	Fake party endorsements and edited videos influenced political conversations during the 2017 & 2022 elections.	Shows how misinformation affects public perception and civic trust in Nepal, underexplored empirically.

## Research Methods

This research utilized a qualitative research strategy and was located within an interpretivist paradigm with assumptions about the nature of knowledge which aligned with the researcher's quest to understand how individuals derive meaning within their socio-cultural contexts. The strategy of research was appropriate and useful for the research objectives: (1) to explore the digital literacy practices within demographic segments, (2) to interpret how individuals process political content online, (3) to examine the impact of the spread of misinformation on individuals' trust in democratic institutions, and (4) to understand the strategies developed by grassroots community members to detect or counter misinformation. The inquiry relied on

a constructivist-interpretivist epistemology that granted the researchers access to participant subjectivities that were based in the digital aspects of a lively dilemma that occurred in citizens' lives.

To draw forth the lived experience of Nepali users of digital media, a hermeneutic phenomenological design was chosen (Bhatt et al. 2020). This design was used to enable interpretive enquiry of the way the participants learned about misinformation and digital literacy in their daily interactions with democracy. Phenomenology was in a good position to examine the construction of socio-political meaning in relation to digital content, to make sense of how people responded to political misinformation, emotionally and cognitively, and to make sense of the informal resistance or compliance practice based on cultural contextual practices.

A purposive sampling strategy was taken to recruit up to ten participants selected purposively based on demographic diversity (age), gender, geographic diversity (urban and rural), and differences in levels of digital access and media literacy. The aim was to include participants representing the diverse socio-demographic groups in the country of Nepal. Thematic saturation was reached after and aligned with a phenomenological approach that also knows the value of depth, instead of breadth (Creswell, 2013).

Data collection occurred between October and December 2025, which consisted of semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Where possible, the interviews took place in-person (and online where it was necessary) and ranged from 45–75 minutes. Except where participants needed to use English, all interviews were conducted in Nepali and were audio-recorded, with participant consent. All transcripts were translated into English, and verbatim (verbatim) interviews were conducted. The non-verbal cues were recorded as reflexive field notes, and to trace our changing comprehension according to the context and data gathering.

For the analysis of the data, Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic approach theory was followed. Braun and Clarke wanted to ensure that the coding and themes emerged and were not predetermined. Using the NVivo (free version), we iteratively coded the transcripts using constant comparison techniques to identify similarities and differences in process, creativity, patterns, assumptions, and contextual meanings. I was also attuned to differences in participants' engagement with misinformation and disinformation by gender, demographic, and the emotional and cultural considerations of their engagement or lack of engagement.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was enhanced through member checking (vulnerable to trustworthiness concerns), where participants were asked to confirm and clarify the important interpretations. Transferability was also addressed by thick description of the sociocultural and digital environment in which the participants exist in. Dependability and confirmability were offered through an audit trail. The audit trail consisted of all coding decisions, analytical memos and reflexive journals addressing any bias related to being a researcher. The ethics committee of the institution gave ethical consent, and all the participants gave informed consent to participate, were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality.

## Findings

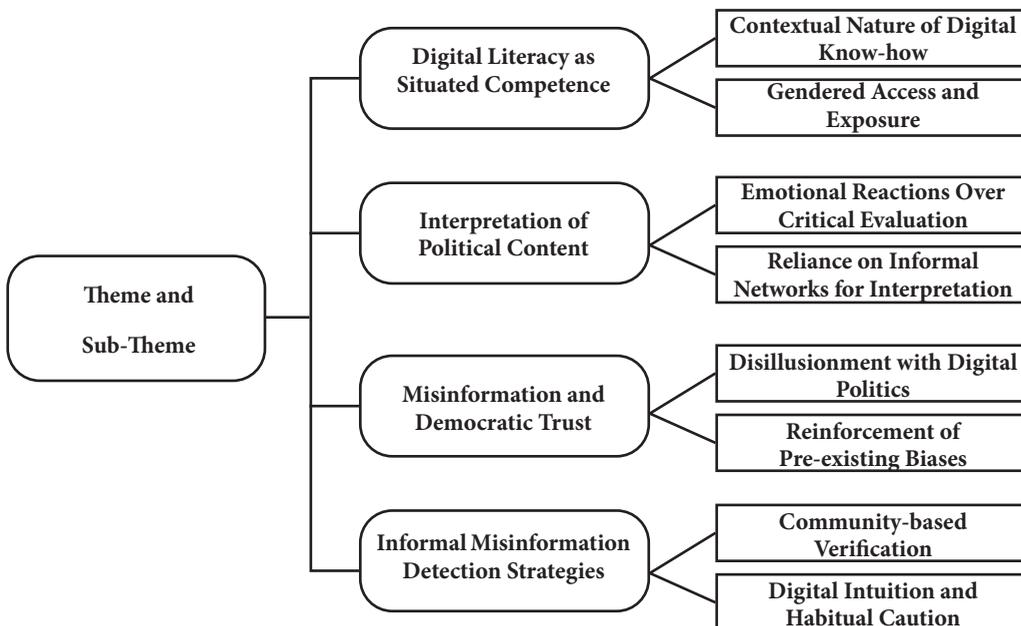
The findings reported in this section can be explained as the results of the extensive, phenomenologically oriented interviews with seven interviewees, who were chosen to reflect a wide range of demographic, geographic, and digital access distribution in Nepal. The analysis is designed in four key themes in accordance with the objectives of the study, which have two sub-themes. Anonymity is maintained with the voices of the participants, which are described using the pseudonymous codes (e.g., P1, P2).

**Table 2**  
**Demographic Profile of the Respondents**

Participant	Gender	Age	Location	Occupation
P1	Male	21	Kathmandu (Urban)	University Student
P2	Female	42	Ilam (Rural)	School Teacher
P3	Male	35	Pokhara (Urban)	Journalist
P4	Female	27	Dang (Rural)	Community Worker
P5	Male	60	Bhaktapur (Urban)	Retired Govt. Staff
P6	Female	33	Lalitpur (Urban)	Small Entrepreneur
P7	Male	45	Jumla (Rural)	Farmer

*Note.* Compiled by the Authors

From the thematic analysis, four key themes emerged along two sub-themes each (see Figure 2)



### **Theme 1: Digital Literacy as Situated Competence**

This theme explores the premise of digital literacy as not a norm or technical ability, but as a practice that is socially situated and which is extended into the everyday life of the participant, depending on social roles and limited by socio-cultural demands. The participants did not situate digital literacy in the formal terms of knowledge and critical media practices. They instead expressed their understandings through activity-specific use that entailed functional need, informal learning, and practices of relations. There were two sub-themes of this broad theme, which were Contextual Nature of Digital Know-how and Gendered Access and Exposure.

**Contextual Nature of Digital Know-how:** This sub-theme consisted of descriptions of digital literacy, not as an organized or measurable body of skills, but as situated capability, regarding everyday activities and community activities. Given this similarity of context, respondents who have diverse contexts, especially in rural settings, characterized digital competence practically, which can incorporate making phone calls, using messaging programs like email format, or even viewing videos. Respondents mentioned digital literacy as not a fixed skill, but one that is situational and is shaped by the day-to-day necessity.

*“I know how to use Facebook and YouTube...., but when it comes to verifying things...., I just ask someone more educated.” (P2)*

*“In our village, using a smartphone itself... feels like being literate digitally. We don’t go beyond what’s needed for calls or TikTok.” (P7, P4)*

Rural participants equated digital literacy to simple functional use, which usually does not include critical assessment skills. Participants in the city possessed wider digital exposure, yet they did not perform assistive skills. This implies that the process of digital literacy in Nepal is highly localized and conceptualized as a continuum that is based on necessity, exposure, and community networks.

**Gendered Access and Exposure:** The second sub-theme highlights how gendered norms and roles critically mediate digital exposure and learning. Across multiple narratives, female participants described being discouraged from digital exploration, with family members restricting or trivializing their engagement with technology.

*“My brother was taught to use apps and search news...., but I was told not to spend too much time online” (P4).*

*“My work needs me to be online, but I had to learn everything by myself...., no one thought a woman needs this knowledge” (P6).*

These experiences reveal how digital inequality in Nepal is not solely infrastructural, but cultural and gendered. Although policy initiatives are often mediated through providing devices or internet access, the act of being digitally active cannot simply be reduced to this notion of access and use alone. When even in urban access, women had to negotiate legitimacy to be digitally active underscores a critical need for inclusion strategies that not only provide instruments of access, but also seek to address the power relations as a region, as well as

an object, is explored in the domestic realm as well as the educational context. This sub-theme affirms that digital literacies are both a technical and political capacity, and that gender continues to be a central axis in which digital citizenship can be constrained or enabled.

## ***Theme 2: Interpretation of Political Content***

This theme illustrates how participants interacted with and made sense of political content within digital spaces. In most cases, participants were not interacting via formal media literacy skills or through evidence-based evaluation processes; instead, participants described a process that was affected heavily by how they felt and who they implicitly trusted. Political content rarely made sense of through a critical or analytical lens; instead, participants made emotional responses to messages based on their moral or emotional praise of that message, regardless of the accuracy of that message. Two separate sub-themes were identified: Emotional Responses Over Critical Evaluation and Trusting Informal Networks to make Sense of Political Content.

**Emotional Reactions Over Critical Evaluation:** This sub-theme is associated with the way in which participants reacted to political information when evaluating it on the basis of their emotional response, rather than its accuracy. Frequent reactions or sharing of digital political content were caused by anger, moral outrage, fear, and hope. The truth-value of a post was not the main consideration of many people, who usually tried to assess the content only after it had already been shared or they had been able to experience an emotional response. In this meaning, political meaning-making was not deliberate, but affective and intuitive.

*“If I see a video that makes me angry about corruption...., I share it first. Later, I might think ‘ if it’s true” (P1).*

*“Sometimes it’s not about true or false. If the message feels right...., we go with it” (P3).*

Most participants engaged politically through affect rather than accuracy. Emotional resonance often overrides factual evaluation. This aligns with post-truth frameworks where feelings displace verifiability in the public sphere.

**Reliance on Informal Networks for Interpretation:** This sub-theme identifies survey respondents who regularly outsourced the interpretation of digital political information to trusted social actors, family members, friends, or local leaders. Due to a lack of verification or cross-checking of information in a more independent way, respondents described looking for help from others, whom they perceived to have a better understanding of the digital landscape or the context. Credibility in these instances was relational; connected through proximity, trust, and perceived authority, rather than institutional or journalistic authority or credibility.

*“I believe what our ward chair posts. He must know.... more than I” (P5).*

*“I forward to my cousin.... relatives if I am not sure.... They use Google” (P2).*

These accounts point to a delegated model of interpretation of the digital that, systemic to their own participation, also relied upon informal networks to mediate their interpretation

of political content. They in effect represent a relational epistemology, in which knowledge is legitimized by a proximate social relation, rather than institutional legitimation. This cognitive framework builds further on the notion that misinformation ecology, like the subjects of this discussion, has acquired some form of socially constructed and preserved trust. Lastly, any intervention other than digital literacy will be subject to knowledge of the relational trust in which the misinformation issues exist, rather than the personal capabilities of an involved participant.

### ***Theme 3: Misinformation and Democratic Trust***

This theme investigates the way participants' repeated experiences with misinformation in digital spaces led to real consequences for their trust in democratic arrangements and institutions. Misinformation was experienced not only as an information problem but as a political and psychological form of stress that resulted in withdrawal or entrenchment. While some participants gave up on political engagement in their digital lives, others more firmly embraced confirmation-driven consumption, reinforcing biases and loyalties of groups they already belonged to. These two emerging and interrelated responses exemplify the lethality of misinformation in digital environments and the polarizing effect of such information. Two sub-themes emerged: Disillusionment with Digital Politics and Reinforcement of Existing Biases.

**Disillusionment with Digital Politics:** This sub-theme shed light on the way exposure to false, manipulated, or conflicting political information over time online contributed to participants' growing disillusionment. Some participants had experience of cumulative erosion of trust, but not just in the digital content, but in the political system and players that mediated the material. Some participants did not engage seriously with the content and instead had a reflexive response of resigned scepticism or complete withdrawal. There was a correspondingly similar sense of digital politics being manipulative, not authentic, and emotionally draining.

*"I don't believe anything anymore.... All parties say what suits them.... Nothing is real" (P5).*

*"After seeing fake posts so many times...., I stopped following politics online" (P6).*

**Reinforcement of Pre-existing Biases:** This sub-theme illustrates a contrary but equally problematic approach to misinformation, the selective consumption and confirmation of content that conforms to one's existing beliefs. The participants revealed that they would avoid content that opposed their views, instead of seeking and considering opposing or diverse viewpoints. In some instances, participants knowingly accepted and circulated misinformation when the misinformation confirmed their group's narrative or emotional tendencies. These practices contribute to the formation of digital echo chambers warranted by information as an identity affirmation, instead of information acquisition.

*“I only read what supports my views.... Other things I skip” (P3).*

*“People in my area only believe what their group believes..... Even if we show them the truth, they reject it” (P7).*

#### **Theme 4: Informal Misinformation Detection Strategies**

We have discussed in this theme how people with limited engagement in formal digital literacy courses, nevertheless, engaged in informal adaptive strategies of discerning misinformation and making their way through uncertainty. The participants had to depend on their heuristics and community designs to find meaning in digital content without institutional provision of fact-checking or media training. Participants were agentic and creative actors in their misinformation management practices, in which they acted on their prior collectives, tacit cues, and trusted local sources. There occurred thereafter two sub-themes of this theme: Community-based Verification, and Digital Intuition and Habitual Caution.

**Community-based Verification:** This sub-theme is used to refer to the fact that participants used relational trust networks in the community to check information they encountered online or to avoid the dissemination of false information. The aspect of seeking information with people whom they felt were more knowledgeable or socially credible (e.g., teachers, elders, religious leaders) was frequently mentioned by the participants. These trusted persons provided meaning to participants to judge uncertainty and authenticate or refute rumors online. The process of verifying information was social, and it was placed in the community life, and it tended to be in physical form of space like tea shops, temples or towns. These unofficial places not only acted as socializing venues, but they were also informally used as checking sites, where online rumors were discussed, judged, and proved or disproved..

*“If I doubt something...., I ask my daughter’s teacher.... or people at the temple....” (P2).*

*“Sometimes we talk in the tea shop...., and others say, ‘this news is fake...., ignore it’” (P4, P7).*

Such strategies point to a form of “relational digital literacy,” wherein trust is rooted not in platforms or institutions but in proximity, familiarity, and shared norms. In environments where algorithmic accountability is low and institutional trust is fragile, participants turned to trusted local actors to help mediate their digital experience.

**Digital Intuition and Habitual Caution:** The second sub-theme reports the way the constant exposure to misinformation preconditioned the informal heuristics and prudent browsing habits among participants. Most said that they relied on a personal gut feeling, and those who knew them employed cues of style (e.g., over-emotional words, sensationalistic headlines, flashy presentation) as warning indicators. These responses were not achieved through formal education or media literacy training, but rather, they were constructed through intuition, experience, and experimentation as one continued using the internet.

*“Now I check if it looks too flashy or angry... Then I don’t click” (P6).*

*“I feel from the language if it’s fake..... If it’s too dramatic, I avoid it” (P1).*

These narratives demonstrate a type of “experiential digital literacy,” which reflects a form of pattern recognition and content filtering, based on lived digital practice. While these strategies are not perfect, they are a practical form of digital resilience in low-resource contexts.

## Discussions

The findings of the present paper allow seeing the impact of digital literacy and misinformation on democratic participation in Nepal as a multidimensional process, built upon the lived experience of the participants. The findings place in the limelight the fact that digital literacy is not a unified entity, but a socially and culturally challenged practice. The discussion is based on theoretical insights of media literacy theories (Weist et al., 2025), relational epistemologies (Markham, 2013), and post-truth politics (McIntyre, 2018), and also presents distinctive empirical work, especially through a Global South lens.

Findings of literacy as digital literacy were found to be a situation-wise, informal group of abilities, conforming to earlier critiques of definitions of literacy, which nonetheless attribute a techno-centric quality to literacy (Livingstone, 2004; Eshé, 2004). As opposed to technical expertise that is given marriage in instrumental models, this paper has found that necessity, access, and community mediate digital literacy in Nepal. Self-perceived competence of the participants was associated with task-oriented use (messaging, scrolling TikTok, asking a person more knowledgeable). The framework proposed by Ng (2012) highlights the value of having a concept of digital literacy that embraces socio-emotional and cognitive aspects.

Moreover, the gendered aspect of digital access reasserts digital inequalities across the globe. South Asian (Arora, 2019) and sub-Saharan African (Wyche and Olson, 2018) studies also record the effects of patriarchal organizations suppressing the digital agency of women despite access to infrastructures. According to Van Dijk (2005), access is a layered phenomenon in that it consists of motivational access, material access, skills access, and usage access, all of which are gendered in practice.

Political information was conceived as an affective, relational process, and not a rational consideration of facts. These results are aligned with the original research on affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015), who hold that emotive responses are not the marginal aspect of political cogitation, but rather the pro forma futures of the way digital publics are excised and kept in place. Considering participants showed a thoughtless inclination toward sharing content that “felt right”, without regard to factuality, and exhibited a considerable variance in heeding accuracy concerns, there is a broader movement toward post-truth political cultures, where emotional truth beats empirical accuracy (Harsin, 2015; McIntyre, 2018).

Reliance on informal networks for content verification is aligned with the relational model of epistemology in that, in conditions of digital marginalization, knowledge is often mediated through social relations rather than with institutional gatekeepers (Markham, 2013). It’s a similar notion to that articulated by Ejaz and Ittefaq (2020), in Pakistan, where participants

discussed trusting their relatives much more than formal media sources for newsworthy information. This forms a challenge for efforts to address individual fact-checking behaviours and to highlight the need for community-based literacy in media.

A key lesson that this study imparts is that misinformation is a harmful factor that undermines democratic trust. The statements of the participants are an illustration of the ways the repeated exposure to manipulated political contents, either produces the sense of disappointment or creates a pathway towards radicalization that ultimately increase the credibility of the argument that Sunstein (2017) makes that we exist in more digitalized settings, which are full of echo chambers and tend to create the politics of groupthink, undermining deliberative democracy. In addition to this, the discriminatory validation of group-related information illustrates the role of misinformation in the accomplishment of identity-affirming roles. This is in support of Guess et al. (2019), who demonstrate that the partisan identity is a stronger predictor of false belief than cognitive ability. The trend accentuates that there is a necessity to redefine digital literacy as a skill set, but as a critical citizenship practice that lies within identity politics.

However, as opposed to deficit discourses that place digitally marginalized communities in the passivity of being deceived, this research demonstrates adaptive resilience by proposing informal practices of detection. Respondents also used community-based verification and user-intuitive cues as feasible heuristics to detect falsehoods. This is consistent with Mihailidis and Viotty (2017), who suggest the idea of the recognition of so-called vernacular literacies that are created during daily media interactions.

The collectivist epistemology of trust and familiarity, evident in community-based approaches like asking teachers or neighbors at a tea shop, was the contrary of the hierarchical and individualistic Western-based model of fact-checking. P6 and P1 clearly indicated through their discussion of the process of recognizing patterns intuitively that there was an emergent experiential digital literacy, like the heuristic processing of credibility in digital settings described by Metzger and Flanagin (2013).

## **Conclusion and Implications**

This is critical research that informs us of the ways both digital literacy and misinformation operate to influence democracy in Nepal and shows that they are both contextual, gendered, and relational, not technologically determinative or value neutral. According to the perspective of phenomenological knowledge, this research was able to define digital literacy as a notion that is localized, where development comes out of everyday interactions, community relationships, and practice that is adaptive and not education or infrastructure. In the same vein, political content is found to be influenced by affect, moral intuition, social trust and not logic and misinformation is found to have a destructive influence using information deficits, but it is an emotional and civic uprooting. Finally, this paper emphasizes that the digital age democratic participation is informed by quality of digital literacy - that is cultivated within the framework of structural inequalities, cultural practices, and informal literacies arising.

In theory, this study constructs a decolonial method of digital literacy and misinformation through the lens of opposing universalized epistemologies and prioritizing localized/alternative practices of knowing and doing. The study advances pluralist, cultural conceptualizations of digital competence as opposed to universalism of digital competence. The results are based on critical media studies, feminist digital theory, and democratic theory and illustrate the interactions of power, identity, and affect in determining digital engagement in Nepal. This project re-imagines how digital literacy can be based on lived experience (in everyday life) and affective, relational logic can be central to the interpretative practices of users, a challenge that operationalizes how misinformation interventions can move beyond the Westernized approaches.

Digital literacy practices cannot be universal and based on uniform project approaches to media habits and social environments. They can employ the services of reliable local vectors such as teachers or religious figures to provide media education that is culturally appropriate and sensible. Emotional and intuitive online activity can be anticipated, which means that the training content initially should be developed to be sensitive in both matters to enable users to associate the online experience with the real-world situation. This is a multidimensional strategy that focuses on critical awareness by providing individuals or groups with the skills to recognize and break down the misinformation in their local geographies and contexts. Digital inclusion must be intersectional and -context based, since the disparities in access and usage of online space are structural to gender ideals, caste relationships, and developmental degrees depending on a geographic area. In this regard, it also empowers government and civil society leaders to jointly create decentralized community spaces that are located within wider misinformation response centers, and culturally aware and responsible to local communities. Training and educating formal and nonformal educators throughout the life course to adult or continuing education instills the element of digital literacy in the sense that individuals would build critical and relational skills to help them participate in a democratic culture and help them as citizens to participate critically in digital content in their life course.

Misinformation also agitates social fragmentation and democratic distancing, hence the need to still foster social cohesion by processes of collectivized fact-checking. This shifts the blame-off-the-individual approach and shifts the blame-on-the-community approach to admit that information evaluation and verification are social activities. It also acknowledges the agency of the marginalized and rural users as an active member of the community which negotiates with their digital realities instead of being a passive consumer of false information. Their active methods of informed citizenship and democratic inclusion must be noted as the necessity.

## **Limitations and Further Research**

Future directions would involve comparative ethnographic research in rural and urban South Asia to explore the contextual differences between informal detection of misinformation through each context. Longitudinal or multi-sited studies are also required to investigate how community based digital literacy practices change through the introduction of government and market interventions, and also the different relationships between access

to digital technologies and caste, ethnic and language identities, trust in information, and misinformation. In addition, exploring how the various generations use digital platforms will offer the researcher an understanding of how the generations differ in terms of digital vulnerability and resilience, thereby facilitating the formulation of more contextual policies.

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## Bio

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