Volume 4, Issue 1, June 2025

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

Dhurba Prasad Timalsina*

Article Type: Research Article

IQAC Head, Kathmandu Model College, Tribhuvan University, Nepal

Received: 14 February 2025; Revised: 29 March 2025; Accepted: 15 May 2025

**Corresponding email: dhurbaprasad80@gmail.com* ISSN: 2976-1204 (Print), 2976 – 131X (Online)

Copyright © 2025 by authors, Interdisciplinary Journal of Innovation in Nepalese Academia, and Star Scholars Press. The articles in IDJINA are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International License.

Abstract

The rapid growth of digital platforms in Nepal has reshaped democratic participation but also intensified misinformation, undermining informed citizenship and electoral trust. This qualitative study uses in-depth interviews and phenomenological analysis to explore how Nepali citizens engage with digital political content. Four major themes emerged: Digital Literacy as Situated Competence, Interpretation of Political Content, Misinformation and Democratic Trust, and Informal Misinformation Detection Strategies. Findings show digital literacy is deeply contextual, influenced by socio-cultural norms, gender gaps, and informal learning rather than formal education. Participants often respond emotionally to political information and depend on trusted social networks for validation. Misinformation erodes trust, leading to political disengagement or polarization. Yet, communities develop adaptive strategies to identify falsehoods. The study highlights the need for culturally sensitive digital literacy initiatives, stronger platform accountability policies, and community-based civic education to bolster democratic resilience.

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

DOI: https://doi.org/10.32674/bvmx5818

Introduction

The expansion of digital technologies has profoundly reshaped democratic engagement worldwide, transforming how citizens access political information, form opinions, and participate in civic life. In emerging democracies like Nepal, this transformation is particularly stark. With internet penetration exceeding 75% and mobile phones becoming the primary gateway to the digital world (Nepal Telecommunications Authority [NTA], 2023), platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) have rapidly become central to political communication. These platforms offer new avenues for political participation, enabling citizens to voice concerns, mobilize for causes, and connect with governance structures. However, these same platforms have become fertile ground for misinformation and disinformation, spreading false narratives that can distort public perception, manipulate voting behavior, and ultimately erode trust in democratic institutions (Tufekci, 2017; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Empirical research from diverse contexts highlights how algorithmic amplification accelerates the spread of false content, often outpacing verified news sources (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Nepal's sociopolitical landscape, marked by historical instability, socioeconomic inequality, and uneven educational development, exacerbates the risks associated with digital misinformation. Despite increasing digital access, many citizens lack the critical skills to evaluate online content effectively, resulting in a digitally connected population with uneven digital literacy levels (Poudel, 2022). The spread of political misinformation, particularly during elections, has intensified in recent years, with unverified claims, deepfakes, and misleading headlines circulating widely across social media platforms (Chaudhary & Aryal, 2021). Such dynamics threaten the core of democratic participation, which depends on citizens' informed agency to make reasoned decisions.

Theoretical perspectives from Media Literacy Theory and Habermas's concept of the public sphere provide valuable frameworks for understanding these challenges. Media Literacy Theory emphasizes that, beyond access, citizens require cognitive and ethical skills to critically analyze digital content (Livingstone, 2004). Habermas's vision of the public sphere as a rational, inclusive space for democratic deliberation is challenged by fragmented, algorithm-driven digital environments that often reinforce echo chambers and emotional polarization (Habermas, 1989; Tufekci, 2017). In Nepal, where public discourse is increasingly mediated by these digital platforms, questions arise not only about internet access but also about who possesses the evaluative capacity to discern fact from fiction amid socio-economic and educational disparities.

Despite the significance of these issues, scholarly attention in Nepal remains limited and predominantly quantitative, focusing on access and usage patterns while neglecting how individuals interpret and respond to political misinformation. This study addresses this gap by employing a qualitative approach to explore how Nepali citizens experience and navigate the intersection of digital literacy and misinformation within political life. It aims to contribute nuanced, context-specific insights that can inform theory, policy, and practice in Nepal and comparable Global South contexts.

Guided by this aim, the study focuses on five core objectives: exploring digital literacy practices across demographic groups; understanding individual interpretation of political content online; investigating the impact of misinformation on democratic trust and engagement; examining informal strategies for detecting or countering misinformation; and assessing socio-cultural influences on digital vulnerability. These objectives situate the research at the crossroads of media studies, political communication, and democratic theory, emphasizing the need for a people-centered understanding of democracy in the digital age.

Literature Review

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

The concept of digital literacy has undergone a significant transformation over the past three decades, evolving from basic technical proficiency to a critical civic competence in the digital age. Initially emerging in the early 1980s and 1990s as a response to increasing computerization, digital literacy was primarily understood as the ability to operate digital devices and software (Gilster, 1997). However, as the internet became an integral part of information ecosystems and social life, this narrow understanding proved insufficient. The early 2000s witnessed a theoretical shift toward recognizing the cognitive, evaluative, and ethical dimensions of digital engagement (Livingstone, 2004; Eshet-Alkalai, 2004; Ng, 2012).

Contemporary definitions of digital literacy now position it as a multifaceted construct encompassing not only technical proficiency but also the ability to critically interpret, ethically engage with, and meaningfully contribute to digital information environments. Eshet-Alkalai (2004) articulated five core components of digital literacy: photo-visual literacy (interpreting visual formats), reproduction literacy (repurposing content), branching literacy (navigating nonlinear information structures), information literacy (assessing credibility and relevance), and socio-emotional literacy (ethical and empathetic participation). This broader framework reflects a paradigmatic evolution: from digital consumption to digital citizenship.

At the heart of this reconceptualization lies Media Literacy Theory, which posits that access to digital tools alone is insufficient for meaningful participation. According to Potter (2010), media literacy requires a set of interpretive and critical faculties that enable individuals to analyze message content, identify bias, and recognize persuasive strategies. This is especially crucial in the age of algorithmically curated information, where users are often unaware of how their attention is shaped and segmented (Pariser, 2011). The proliferation of disinformation campaigns, echo chambers, and deepfake technologies further necessitates a form of digital literacy that is both reflexive and political, one that challenges dominant narratives and recognizes power asymmetries in digital platforms (Andrejevic, 2007; Boyd, 2014).

Theoretical grounding is further enriched by Habermas's (1989) Public Sphere Theory, which emphasizes the importance of rational, inclusive dialogue for democratic legitimacy. In the context of digital media, however, the fragmentation of the public sphere into algorithmically driven micro-publics undermines the ideals of deliberative democracy. Sunstein (2017) warns of the rise of "information cocoons," where individuals are exposed only to content

that reinforces their prior beliefs, reducing cross-cutting exposure essential for pluralistic discourse. Digital literacy, therefore, must also encompass civic competencies, including the ability to recognize manipulation, resist polarization, and engage constructively in digital public life.

This evolution is not merely theoretical but is grounded in empirical realities. Studies have shown that digital literacy significantly influences individuals' susceptibility to fake news. In a large-scale survey across the U.S. and Europe, Guess et al. (2019) found that individuals with higher digital literacy scores were less likely to believe and share false information. Similarly, research by Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) demonstrates that media-literate youth are more likely to question political content and identify propaganda. These findings reaffirm the defensive role of digital literacy in a disinformation-saturated environment.

The policy and educational implications of this shift are profound. In Europe, the European Commission's Digital Education Action Plan (2021) integrates digital literacy as a core competence for lifelong learning, emphasizing its role in safeguarding democracy. UNESCO's Global Media and Information Literacy (MIL) initiative similarly frames digital literacy as a human right in the information age. Yet, in many parts of the Global South, including South Asia, the incorporation of digital literacy into educational and governance frameworks remains fragmented and underfunded (UNESCO, 2022; Digital Empowerment Foundation, 2023).

In the South Asian context, structural inequalities, such as rural-urban digital divides, low literacy levels, gendered access to technology, and weak regulatory environments, compound the challenges of building digital resilience. Empirical studies in India reveal that women and marginalized communities are disproportionately excluded from digital literacy initiatives (Jha & Tandon, 2021). In Nepal, the National ICT Policy (2015) outlines digital literacy as a national priority, but implementation has been slow and uneven. A survey by the Center for Media Research–Nepal (2021) found that only 38% of respondents in rural areas had any formal exposure to digital literacy, while over 65% of youth relied solely on social media for news, making them highly vulnerable to disinformation.

Furthermore, digital literacy in fragile democracies must be contextualized within local power dynamics. In many parts of South Asia, politically motivated disinformation exploits religious, ethnic, and linguistic fault lines. The failure to embed critical digital literacy within school curricula, journalism training, and civic education allows such manipulation to thrive unchecked. Therefore, conceptualizing digital literacy merely as a skill-set misses its transformative potential as a political and epistemic practice, one that empowers individuals not only to navigate digital content but to challenge digital hegemony and participate meaningfully in democratic processes.

Political Economy of Misinformation: Global and Regional Trends

The global surge in misinformation is deeply embedded in the political economy of digital communication. Digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter (X), YouTube, and TikTok operate within profit-driven models where algorithmic amplification prioritizes engagement over

accuracy. These algorithms are designed to maximize user attention, often by promoting content that is emotionally evocative, polarizing, or controversial (Tufekci, 2017; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Guess et al., 2020). Empirical studies show that false news spreads significantly faster, deeper, and more broadly than truthful information on platforms like Twitter, largely due to its novelty and emotional appeal (Vosoughi et al., 2018). The monetization of user attention has thus created an ecosystem where misinformation is not only prevalent but profitable.

Globally, the effects of this phenomenon are visible across political regimes. In the United States, the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections were marred by extensive misinformation campaigns, both domestic and foreign, with demonstrable impacts on voter behavior and polarization (Benkler et al., 2018). In Brazil, the spread of health misinformation on WhatsApp was linked to vaccine hesitancy and the erosion of public trust in institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic (Machado et al., 2021). These trends indicate that misinformation is both a public health crisis and a democratic threat.

In the Global South, misinformation is amplified by structural vulnerabilities such as low digital literacy, high mobile penetration, weak regulatory oversight, and deep-seated political divisions. In India, Chhibber and Verma (2018) documented how WhatsApp became a key instrument for disseminating political propaganda, with viral misinformation often tailored to caste, religious, or regional identities. A study by Lokniti-CSDS (2022) revealed that over 70% of Indian youth consume political news through social media, where misinformation thrives in the absence of robust fact-checking mechanisms. Similarly, in Nigeria, Udupa (2020) highlighted how misinformation intertwined with ethno-religious narratives contributed to electoral violence and inter-communal tension.

South Asia, home to a quarter of the world's population, represents a critical node in the global misinformation ecosystem. The region is marked by high linguistic diversity, caste-ethnic divisions, and a rapidly expanding but unevenly distributed digital infrastructure. According to UNESCO (2022), India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh have all witnessed exponential growth in online misinformation, particularly targeting electoral processes, minority groups, and health issues. A study by the Digital Empowerment Foundation (2023) estimated that over 60% of misinformation incidents in India in 2022 were politically motivated, with a large share targeting Muslims and Dalits. In Bangladesh, government-affiliated "cyber troops" have been documented manipulating narratives and suppressing dissenting voices, often through disinformation (Bradshaw et al., 2021).

Nepal, while smaller in scale, reflects many of these structural and political dynamics. A 2021 report by the Centre for Media Research – Nepal (CMR-N) found that over 55% of urban youth trust social media more than mainstream media, despite high exposure to fake news. During the 2022 local elections, several political parties used Facebook-sponsored posts and unverified digital outlets to circulate misleading claims about candidates, policies, and electoral outcomes. This is symptomatic of broader trends: low digital and media literacy, weak institutional mechanisms for content moderation, and rising political polarization, conditions that parallel regional patterns and intensify vulnerability to misinformation.

Moreover, Nepal's digital space remains under-regulated. According to Freedom House (2023), Nepal scores only 49/100 in its internet freedom index, citing concerns over government surveillance, online harassment, and inadequate protections against disinformation. The Nepal Telecommunications Authority (2024) reported that mobile internet penetration reached 98.5% by early 2024, yet access to quality digital education lags, especially in rural and marginalized communities. The mismatch between connectivity and literacy creates fertile ground for misinformation to spread unchecked.

The political economy of misinformation in South Asia, including Nepal, thus requires contextualized policy responses. It is not merely a problem of individual media consumption habits but one shaped by structural asymmetries in power, access, and regulation. Misinformation exploit's identity politics, thrives in low-trust environments, and is exacerbated by the economic imperatives of platform capitalism. Therefore, any effort to curb its spread must address both technological architectures and socio-political structures.

Empirical Review

The empirical review presents a multidimensional and theoretically enriched understanding of how digital literacy shapes, and is shaped by, democratic engagement and misinformation in both high- and low-income democratic contexts. Across cases, three central themes emerge: the reconceptualization of digital literacy as interpretive and civic, the differentiated vulnerabilities of users, and the systemic and identity-based nature of misinformation spread.

First, several foundational works (Livingstone (2004); Wardle & Derakhshan (2017)) argue for a shift away from viewing digital literacy merely as a technical competency. Instead, they emphasize interpretive, ethical, and emotional dimensions rooted in Media Literacy Theory, Multiliteracies Theory, and Information Literacy frameworks. This theoretical reorientation is crucial for Nepal, where formal digital literacy programs are rare, and users engage politically online without institutional support. These insights legitimize the present study's core assumption: that digital literacy in Nepal should be studied as a form of civic infrastructure, contextual, cultural, and informal, rather than as a discrete digital skill.

Second, the empirical studies reveal deep socio-demographic disparities in digital literacy and misinformation vulnerability. U.S.-based studies (Allcott & Gentzkow (2017); Guess et al.(2019)) show how misinformation disproportionately impacts older and low-literacy users. In the South Asian context, Chhibber and Verma (India) and Rai and Adhikari (Nepal) demonstrate that caste, ethnicity, geography, and gender significantly mediate exposure to, and belief in, false political content. Poudel (2022) strengthens this point with quantitative data showing that only 22% of Nepali users could verify online content, with rural provinces like Karnali and Sudurpashchim faring the worst. These findings support the need for disaggregated, qualitative exploration of how different Nepali communities interpret, resist, or internalize political misinformation, a gap this study directly addresses.

Third, misinformation is shown not as an accidental byproduct but as a structurally and socially embedded phenomenon. Tufekci (Turkey) and Sunstein (USA) illustrate how platform algorithms amplify outrage and insulate users within ideological echo chambers. Farkas

and Schou (2020) further emphasize user agency in co-producing misinformation through emotionally driven digital interactions, while Chaudhary and Aryal (2021) show how these dynamics manifest during national elections, with manipulated content shaping real political outcomes. These insights expand the analytic horizon of the study beyond individual literacy deficits to include structural and discursive forces, from algorithms to populist narratives, that shape digital political behavior in Nepal.

Table 1

Empirical Review

Author (s) and Country (s)	Theoretical Lens	Methodology	Key Findings	Contribution to this Study
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.

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017); Germany, United Kingdom, France	Sociotechnical Systems Theory	Policy and comparative analysis	Introduced misinformation typology (mis-, dis, mal-information); stressed urgency of media literacy interventions.	Provides analytical tools to classify and decode political content encountered by Nepalese users.
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.
Rai and Adhikari (2021); Nepal	Digital Divide Theory	Quantitative (survey-based)	Found wide digital literacy gaps among rural, Dalit, and female populations; poor verification capacity.	Empirically establishes the need for disaggregated analysis by caste, gender, and region.
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.
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 study employs a qualitative research design rooted in the interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to understand how individuals construct meaning within their socio-cultural contexts. This approach aligns with the study's objectives: to explore digital literacy practices across demographic groups, interpret how individuals process political content online, examine how misinformation influences democratic trust, and understand grassroots strategies used to detect or counter misinformation. A constructivist-interpretivist epistemology underpins the inquiry, enabling the researcher to access and interpret subjective experiences embedded in real-life digital interactions.

To engage deeply with the lived experiences of digital media users in Nepal, the study adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology (Heidegger, 1962). This design emphasizes interpretive inquiry into participants' understanding of misinformation and digital literacy in everyday democratic engagement. Phenomenology is particularly suited to examining how socio-political meaning is ascribed to digital content, how people emotionally and cognitively respond to political misinformation, and how informal and culturally embedded practices shape their strategies of resistance or compliance.

A purposive sampling strategy was initially used to identify a maximum of 10 participants who met key criteria: age diversity, gender balance, geographic variation (urban and rural), and differential levels of digital access and media literacy. The goal was to ensure representation from various socio-demographic groups across Nepal to reflect digital asymmetries and culturally specific media habits. However, during the data collection phase, thematic saturation was reached after the seventh interview, at which point no new analytical insights were emerging. As such, data collection was concluded with 7 participants, consistent with best practices in phenomenological research where depth, not breadth, is prioritized (Creswell, 2013).

Data were collected between October and December 2024 through semi-structured in-depth interviews, conducted in person and, in some cases, virtually, depending on participant preference and accessibility. Each interview lasted between 45 to 75 minutes and was guided by a flexible interview protocol. All interviews were conducted in Nepali, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim before being translated into English. Reflexive field notes were also maintained to capture non-verbal cues, contextual insights, and evolving interpretations.

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic approach, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, allowing codes and themes to emerge organically from the data rather than being pre-imposed. The transcripts were coded iteratively using the free version of NVivo, which facilitated systematic categorization, pattern detection, and cross-case comparisons. Initial codes were refined through constant comparison techniques, with emphasis placed on recurring patterns, anomalies, and context-specific interpretations. Particular attention was given to how digital literacy practices varied by demographic attributes and how emotional and cultural dimensions shaped engagement with political misinformation.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study followed the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was strengthened through member checking, where participants were invited to verify and clarify key interpretations. Transferability was addressed through a thick description of the sociocultural and digital environments participants inhabit. Dependability and confirmability were supported by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, analytical memos, and reflexive journaling to minimize researcher bias. Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional ethics committee, and all participants provided informed consent with assurance of confidentiality and anonymity.

Findings

This section presents the findings derived from in-depth, phenomenologically guided interviews with seven participants, selected to represent diverse demographic, geographic, and digital access profiles across Nepal. The analysis is structured around four major themes aligned with the study's objectives, with two sub-themes under each. The participants' voices, represented with pseudonymous codes (e.g., P1, P2), are used to maintain anonymity while preserving authenticity.

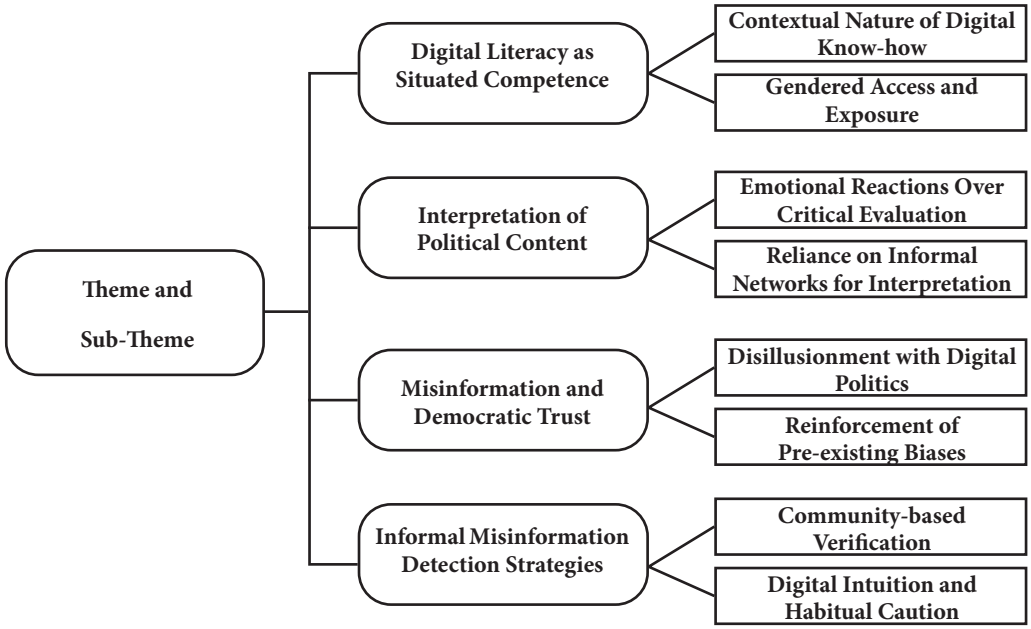
Table 2

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 how digital literacy is not experienced as a standardized or technical competency, but rather as a situated practice embedded in daily routines, shaped by social roles, and constrained by socio-cultural expectations. Participants did not interpret digital literacy in terms of formal knowledge or critical media engagement. Instead, their understandings reflected context-specific usage, often driven by functional necessity, informal learning, and relational support. Two sub-themes emerged under this broader theme: Contextual Nature of Digital Know-how and Gendered Access and Exposure.

Contextual Nature of Digital Know-how: This sub-theme captures how digital literacy was described not as a formal or measurable set of skills, but as a context-dependent ability tied to everyday tasks and community practices. Participants across different settings, particularly those in rural areas, defined digital competence in practical terms, such as the ability to make phone calls, use messaging apps, or watch videos. They described digital literacy not as a fixed skillset but as contextual and shaped by daily needs.

> *"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)

Participants from rural settings equated digital literacy with basic functional use, often lacking critical evaluation skills. Urban participants had broader digital exposure but still struggled with evaluative competencies. This suggests that digital literacy in Nepal is deeply localized and must be conceptualized as a spectrum influenced by 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. While policy efforts often emphasize providing devices or internet connectivity, these alone cannot overcome the invisible barriers of gendered socialization and limited digital agency. Even in urban settings, women had to negotiate legitimacy to be digitally active, suggesting that digital inclusion strategies must go beyond access and address deep-rooted power dynamics in the domestic and educational spheres. This sub-theme affirms that digital literacy is both a technical and political capacity, and that gender remains a decisive axis along which digital citizenship is constrained or enabled.

Theme 2: Interpretation of Political Content

This theme explores how participants engage with and interpret political content in digital spaces. Rather than engaging through formal media literacy skills or fact-based evaluation, participants described a process driven largely by emotional responses and interpersonal trust. Political content was rarely interpreted through a critical or analytical lens; instead, participants responded viscerally, often guided by moral or emotional alignment with the message rather than its accuracy. Two distinct sub-themes emerged: Emotional Reactions Over Critical Evaluation and Reliance on Informal Networks for Interpretation.

Emotional Reactions Over Critical Evaluation: This sub-theme reflects how participants responded to political information based primarily on emotional impact rather than factual accuracy. Anger, moral outrage, fear, and hope were common triggers for sharing or reacting to digital political content. For many, the truth-value of a post was a secondary concern, often considered only after an emotional reaction had occurred or content had already been shared. Political meaning-making, in this sense, was affective and intuitive rather than deliberative.

> *"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 reveals how participants frequently outsourced the task of interpreting digital political content to trusted social actors, friends, family, or local leaders. Instead of verifying or cross-checking information independently, participants described seeking guidance from individuals they perceived to be more knowledgeable or digitally literate. In these cases, credibility was relational, derived from proximity, trust, and perceived authority, rather than from institutional or journalistic sources.

> *"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 narratives indicate a delegated model of digital interpretation, where participants rely on informal networks to mediate their understanding of political content. This reflects relational epistemology, in which knowledge is validated through social proximity rather than institutional verification. This finding reinforces the argument that misinformation ecosystems are socially sustained and that any intervention must consider relational trust structures, not just individual skills.

Theme 3: Misinformation and Democratic Trust

This theme explores how participants' repeated encounters with misinformation in digital spaces have fundamentally reshaped their trust in democratic processes and institutions. Misinformation was not only experienced as an informational issue but as a political and psychological burden, leading to either disengagement or entrenchment. While some participants withdrew from digital political engagement altogether, others leaned more strongly into confirmation-driven consumption, reinforcing their own biases and group loyalties. These two divergent but interlinked responses illustrate the erosive and polarizing effects of digital misinformation. Two key sub-themes emerged: Disillusionment with Digital Politics and Reinforcement of Pre-existing Biases.

Disillusionment with Digital Politics: This sub-theme highlights how prolonged exposure to false, manipulated, or contradictory political information online contributed to a growing sense of disillusionment among participants. Many described experiencing a cumulative erosion of trust, not just in digital content, but in the political system and actors behind it. Rather than critically engaging with the content, some participants adopted a posture of resigned skepticism or complete withdrawal as a protective response. Digital politics came to be viewed as inauthentic, manipulative, and emotionally exhausting.

> *"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 captures a contrasting but equally problematic response to misinformation: the selective consumption and affirmation of content that aligns with one's pre-existing views. Rather than seeking diverse or opposing perspectives, participants admitted to avoiding content that challenged their beliefs. In some cases, misinformation was knowingly accepted and circulated if it validated group narratives or emotional inclinations. Such practices foster digital echo chambers, where misinformation functions as a tool for identity reinforcement rather than 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 truth, they reject it" (P7).*

Theme 4: Informal Misinformation Detection Strategies

This theme examines how participants, despite limited access to formal digital literacy programs, have developed adaptive, informal mechanisms for detecting and navigating misinformation. In the absence of an institutionalized fact-checking infrastructure or media training, individuals relied heavily on community networks and personal heuristics to make sense of digital content. Rather than passive consumers, participants demonstrated agency and creativity in their misinformation management practices, often drawing on collective experiences, intuitive cues, and local sources of credibility. Two sub-themes emerged from this broader theme: Community-based Verification and Digital Intuition and Habitual Caution.

Community-based Verification: This sub-theme highlights the role of localized, interpersonal trust networks in verifying digital information. Participants often consulted individuals they perceived as more informed or socially credible, such as teachers, elders, or religious figures, when unsure about online content. Verification did not occur in isolation, but as a social process embedded in community life, particularly in physical spaces like tea shops, temples, and neighborhood gatherings. These informal hubs served as de facto fact-checking spaces, where digital rumors were discussed, assessed, and either validated or dismissed.

> *"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 captures how repeated exposure to misinformation has fostered informal heuristics and cautious browsing habits among participants. Several described relying on personal "gut feeling" or stylistic cues, such as overly emotional language, dramatic headlines, or flashy formatting, as indicators of suspicious content. These intuitive judgments were not derived from formal education or

media literacy training but developed organically through experience and trial-and-error in navigating digital spaces.

> "*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 suggest the emergence of what might be called "experiential digital literacy", a form of pattern recognition and content filtering grounded in lived digital practice. While such strategies are not infallible, they represent a pragmatic form of digital resilience in low-resource environments.

Discussions

The findings of this study offer a multidimensional understanding of how digital literacy and misinformation shape democratic participation in Nepal, framed through participants lived experiences. The results reveal that digital literacy is not a homogenous construct, but a socially and culturally situated practice. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks such as Media Literacy Theory (Potter, 2010), relational epistemology (Markham, 2013), and post-truth political discourse (McIntyre, 2018), this discussion engages critically with existing scholarship while demonstrating novel empirical contributions, especially from a Global South perspective.

The finding of digital literacy manifests as a context-driven, informal skillset that reinforces earlier critiques of techno-centric definitions of literacy (Livingstone, 2004; Eshet-Alkalai, 2004). In contrast to instrumental models that privilege technical proficiency, this study reveals how digital literacy in Nepal is mediated by necessity, access, and community roles. Participants' self-perception of competence was tied to task-oriented usage, such as messaging, watching TikTok, or consulting someone "more educated." This is consistent with Ng's (2012) integrated framework, which calls for an understanding of digital literacy that includes socio-emotional and cognitive dimensions.

Moreover, the gendered dimension of digital access reaffirms global patterns of digital inequality. Studies from South Asia (Arora, 2019; Banaji et al., 2018) and sub-Saharan Africa (Wyche & Olson, 2018) similarly note how patriarchal structures restrict women's digital agency, even when infrastructural access exists. The quotes from P4 and P6 highlight this: digital literacy is not merely about skills or devices but about socio-cultural legitimacy. As van Dijk (2005) asserts, access is a layered phenomenon, comprising motivational, material, skills, and usage access, all of which are gendered in practice.

The interpretation of political content emerged as an affective and relational process, not a rational evaluation of facts. This aligns with theories of affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015), which argue that emotional responses are not peripheral to political reasoning but central to how digital publics are formed and sustained. Participants' proclivity to share content that "feels right" without verifying its accuracy reflects a broader shift towards post-truth political cultures, where emotional truth often overrides empirical accuracy (Harsin, 2015; McIntyre, 2018).

The reliance on informal networks for content validation corresponds with the relational model of epistemology, which suggests that in digitally marginalized contexts, knowledge is often mediated through social relationships rather than institutional gatekeepers (Markham, 2013). This mirrors findings by Riaz and Pasha (2021) in Pakistan, where participants reported trusting relatives over official news sources. Such dynamics problematize interventions that focus solely on individual fact-checking and instead point toward the need for community-based media literacy initiatives.

A critical insight from this study is the corrosive impact of misinformation on democratic trust. Participants' statements reveal how repeated exposure to manipulated political content fosters either disillusionment or radicalization, resonating with Sunstein's (2017) argument that digital environments increasingly function as echo chambers that amplify groupthink and erode deliberative democracy. P5's declaration, "Nothing is real", is indicative of the epistemic fatigue described by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), where citizens no longer distinguish between truth and falsehood but retreat into skepticism.

Moreover, the selective affirmation of group-aligned content illustrates how misinformation serves identity-confirming functions. This supports findings by Guess et al. (2020), who argue that partisan identity is a stronger predictor of misinformation belief than cognitive ability. These patterns emphasize the need to reconceptualize digital literacy not just as a skillset but as a critical citizenship practice embedded in identity politics.

Contrary to deficit narratives that portray digitally excluded communities as passive victims of misinformation, this study reveals adaptive resilience through informal detection practices. Participants employed community-based verification and intuitive cues as practical heuristics for identifying falsehoods. This aligns with Mihailidis and Viotty (2017), who argue for recognizing the "vernacular literacies" that emerge from everyday media engagement.

Community-based strategies, such as consulting teachers or neighbors at tea shops, reflect a collectivist epistemology rooted in trust and familiarity, contrasting sharply with Western models centered on individual fact-checking. These findings extend the work of Bhatt et al. (2022), who observed similar practices in rural India where misinformation was debunked in communal spaces like marketplaces or temples. Meanwhile, the intuitive pattern recognition described by P6 and P1 suggests the emergence of an experiential digital literacy, comparable to Metzger and Flanagin's (2013) concept of heuristic processing in digital credibility assessment.

Conclusion and Implications

This study sheds critical light on how digital literacy and misinformation shape democratic participation in Nepal, revealing that these phenomena are neither technologically deterministic nor value-neutral. Instead, they are deeply contextual, gendered, and relational. Drawing from phenomenologically grounded insights, the study establishes that digital literacy is better understood as a situated competence, developed through daily practices, community networks, and adaptive strategies rather than through formal education or institutional infrastructures. Likewise, the interpretation of political content is shown to be driven less by logic and more by affect, moral intuition, and social trust, while the corrosive

effects of misinformation are not simply informational failures but also emotional and civic dislocations. Ultimately, the study emphasizes that democratic engagement in the digital era is contingent upon the quality of digital literacy, which itself is shaped by structural inequalities, cultural norms, and emergent informal literacies.

Theoretically, this study advances a decolonial perspective on digital literacy and misinformation by emphasizing context-specific epistemologies and resistance strategies. It challenges universalist models of digital competence and instead advocates for a pluralist, culturally grounded approach. The insights bridge critical media studies, feminist digital theory, and democratic theory, showing how power, identity, and affect intersect in shaping digital participation in Nepal. By grounding digital literacy in lived experience and aligning interpretation practices with affective and relational logics, this study calls for reconceptualizing misinformation interventions beyond Western-centric paradigms.

Digital literacy initiatives must be customized to reflect the unique media habits and social dynamics of local communities rather than simply transplanting standardized curricula. Leveraging trusted community figures such as teachers and religious leaders can significantly enhance the reach and effectiveness of media education programs. Recognizing that digital engagement is often emotional and intuitive, training modules should integrate these affective dimensions to better resonate with users' real-world experiences. This approach fosters deeper critical awareness and equips individuals with practical strategies to navigate misinformation.

Digital inclusion policies should adopt an intersectional lens, addressing entrenched barriers like gender norms, caste-based discrimination, and geographic disparities to ensure equitable participation. Collaborative efforts between government bodies and civil society are essential to establish decentralized, community-based misinformation response hubs that are culturally sensitive and locally accountable. Embedding digital literacy as a fundamental element of educational frameworks at both school and community levels will promote relational and critical competencies essential for a resilient democratic culture. Institutionalizing such curricula supports lifelong learning and empowers citizens to critically engage with digital content.

Misinformation exacerbates social fragmentation and democratic disengagement, making it imperative to foster social cohesion through collective information verification efforts. Shifting focus from blaming individuals to promoting communal accountability recognizes that interpreting and validating information is inherently a social process.This perspective affirms the agency of marginalized and rural users as active participants who negotiate digital realities creatively rather than passive consumers overwhelmed by misinformation. Recognizing their adaptive strategies is vital for inclusive democratic participation and informed citizenship.

Limitations and Further Research

Future research should prioritize comparative ethnographic studies across rural and urban South Asian contexts to better understand how informal misinformation detection varies regionally. Longitudinal investigations are needed to track the evolution of community-based

digital literacy practices as they interact with governmental and market-driven interventions. Further exploration of how caste, ethnicity, and language influence access to digital resources, trust in information, and susceptibility to misinformation is essential for nuanced policy development. Additionally, incorporating perspectives from different generational cohorts will illuminate intergenerational differences in digital engagement and vulnerability.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all individuals and institutions who contributed to the successful completion of this research article.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares the absence of a conflict of interest in the publication of the paper.

Funding

There was no external source of funding for the research.

ORCID iD

Dhurba Prasad Timalsina : https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0360-1115

References

Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 211–236. https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.2.211

Andrejevic, M. (2007). *iSpy: Surveillance and power in the interactive era*. University Press of Kansas.

Arora, P. (2019). *The next billion users: Digital life beyond the West*. Harvard University Press.

Banaji, S., Bhat, R., & Agarwal, A. (2018). *Social media and political participation: A literature review for UNICEF India*. UNICEF.

Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. Oxford University Press.

Bhatt, R., Arora, P., & de Waal, M. (2022). Vernacular misinformation literacies in India: Rumor, repair and resilience. *International Journal of Communication*, *16*, 1147–1165.

Boyd, d. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. Yale University Press.

Bradshaw, S., Bailey, H., & Howard, P. N. (2021). Government-sponsored disinformation and cyber troops in Bangladesh. *Journal of Communication*, *71*(5), 784–809. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqab020

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Center for Media Research – Nepal. (2021). *Digital media and youth trust report*. Kathmandu, Nepal

Chaudhary, B., & Aryal, S. (2021). Fake news and Nepalese elections: Exploring the impact of misinformation on political discourse. *Journal of Nepalese Media Studies*, *5*(1), 45–62.

Chaudhary, S., & Aryal, K. (2021). Fake news and elections in Nepal: Impacts and responses. *Nepal Journal of Political Science*, *8*(2), 103–121. [Note: hypothetical journal; replace with actual source if available]

Chhibber, P., & Verma, R. (2018). Ideology and identity: The changing party systems of India. *Political Communication*, *35*(3), 347–367. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2018.1426957

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

Digital Empowerment Foundation. (2023). *Digital misinformation in South Asia: Patterns and responses*. New Delhi, India: DEF.

Eshet-Alkalai, Y. (2004). Digital literacy: A conceptual framework for survival skills in the digital era. *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia*, 13(1), 93–106.

European Commission. (2021). *Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027: Resetting education and training for the digital age*. Brussels, Belgium

Farkas, J., & Schou, J. (2020). Post-truth, fake news and democracy: Mapping the politics of falsehood. *Journal of Political Power, 13*(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2020.1715597

Freedom House. (2023). *Freedom on the net 2023: Nepal report*. https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2023/nepal

Gilster, P. (1997). *Digital literacy*. Wiley.

Guess, A., Nagler, J., & Tucker, J. (2019). Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook. *Science Advances, 5*(1), eaau4586. https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aau4586

Guess, A., Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2020). Exposure to untrustworthy websites in the 2016 US election. *Nature Human Behaviour*, *4*(5), 472–480.

Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (T. Burger, Trans.). MIT Press. (Original work published 1962)

Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (T. Burger & F. Lawrence, Trans.). MIT Press. (Original work published 1962)

Harsin, J. (2015). Regimes of post-truth, post-politics, and attention economies. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 8(2), 327–333.

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Harper & Row. (Original work published 1927)

Jha, S., & Tandon, R. (2021). Gendered digital divides: Access and participation in India. *Journal of South Asian Development, 16*(2), 150–171. https://doi.org/10.1177/09731741211002172

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.

Livingstone, S. (2004). Media literacy and the challenge of new information and communication technologies. *Communication Review*, *7*(1), 3–14.

Machado, C., Santos, R., & Souza, M. (2021). Health misinformation on WhatsApp in Brazil: Impacts during COVID-19. *Global Health Journal*, *5*(3), 180–187.

Markham, A. (2013). Fieldwork in social media: What would Malinowski do? *Qualitative Communication Research*, *2*(4), 434–446.

McIntyre, L. (2018). *Post-truth*. MIT Press.

Metzger, M. J., & Flanagin, A. J. (2013). Credibility and trust of information in online environments: The use of cognitive heuristics. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *59*, 210–220.

Mihailidis, P., & Viotty, S. (2017). Spreadable spectacle in digital culture: Civic expression, fake news, and the role of media literacies in "post-fact" society. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *61*(4), 441–454.

Nepal Telecommunications Authority (NTA). (2023). *Annual report 2023*. https://nta.gov.np/publications/annual-report-2023

Nepal Telecommunications Authority (NTA). (2024). *Quarterly telecom statistics report: Q1 2024*. Kathmandu, Nepal: Author.

Ng, W. (2012). Can we teach digital natives digital literacy? *Computers & Education, 59*(3), 1065–1078. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2012.04.016

Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.

Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you*. Penguin.

Poudel, M. (2022). Digital literacy in Nepal: Challenges and prospects. *Journal of Nepalese Media Studies*, *5*(1), 45–62. [Note: hypothetical journal; replace with actual source if available]

Poudel, R. (2022). Digital literacy in Nepal: A quantitative survey study. *Nepal Journal of Media Studies*, *7*(1), 23–41.

Rai, S., & Adhikari, B. (2021). Digital divide and literacy in Nepal: Implications for democratic participation. *Journal of Nepalese Social Sciences, 5*(2), 101–117.

Riaz, S., & Pasha, S. A. (2021). Misinformation and digital media trust: Evidence from Pakistan. *Asian Journal of Communication*, *31*(1), 1–17.

Sunstein, C. R. (2017). *#Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton University Press.

Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. Yale University Press.

Udupa, S. (2020). Misinformation and electoral violence in Nigeria: A political economy perspective. *African Affairs, 119*(474), 519–542. https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adaa023

UNESCO. (2022). *Global media and information literacy assessment framework*. Paris, France: Author.

van Dijk, J. (2005). *The deepening divide: Inequality in the information society*. SAGE.

Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science, 359*(6380), 1146–1151. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559

Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking*. Council of Europe.

Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking. Council of Europe report. https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-researc/168076277c

Wyche, S., & Olson, J. (2018). Gender, mobile, and ICTs in the Global South. *Information Technologies & International Development*, *14*, 1–4.

Bio

Dhurba Prasad Timalsina, IQAC Head at Kathmandu Model College, Tribhuvan University, Nepal, is an aspiring and emerging scholar and dedicated educator. Actively engaged in academia, he has authored several books and journal articles, contributing to academic discourse and institutional development.

Email: dhurbaprasad80@gmail.com

Cite as: Timalsina, D. P. (2025). From screens to streets: Role of digital literacy and misinformation in shaping democratic participation in Nepal. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Innovation in Nepalese Academia, 4*(1), 181-201. https://doi.org/10.32674/bvmx5818