Digital Literacy and Its Impact on Employment in Nepal

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Abstract

In today's rapidly evolving digital world, digital literacy has become crucial for accessing employment opportunities, especially in developing countries such as Nepal. Despite notable advancements in internet penetration and mobile connectivity, Nepal faces significant challenges in translating access into meaningful digital engagement. This literature review aims to explore the impact of digital literacy on employment opportunities and outcomes in Nepal by analyzing a wide range of sources, including research papers, policy reports, and national data. It highlights how a persistent digital divide, shaped by factors such as geography, socioeconomic status, gender, and education, reinforces employment inequality. Furthermore, the findings suggest that while employers increasingly demand digital proficiency, many young people, women, and individuals from rural and marginalized communities remain underprepared due to challenges such as outdated curricula, limited access to digital training, and a lack of digital infrastructure. These skill gaps not only limit local job access but also push youth toward foreign labor markets, contributing to an ongoing brain drain and economic vulnerability. Understanding these concepts is important not only for addressing current labor market gaps but also for shaping inclusive policies that strengthen digital competencies, expand access to training for diverse communities, and help build a stronger workforce that can adapt to Nepal's changing economy.

Keywords: digital literacy, Nepal, digital divide, employment

Introduction to Digital Literacy

Digital literacy is an important skill in today's digital world. It allows individuals to access, evaluate, create, and communicate information using digital tools in their personal and professional lives. The American Library Association defines digital literacy as the ability to use information and communication technologies effectively for information (American Library Association, n.d.). The term "digital literacy," however, has evolved gradually with time. While it used to refer to the ability to read and comprehend information in hypertext or multimedia formats (Lanham, 1995), it now suggests a broader skill set of critical thinking, information evaluation, and digital communication (Gilster, 1997). Initially, digital literacy meant only having basic computer skills, but Gilster emphasized that true digital literacy means "mastering ideas, not keystrokes" (p.2). Over time, the definition has expanded to include analyzing information for credibility, synthesizing knowledge, and adapting to new digital environments (Bawden, 2008). Today, it is a crucial life skill integrating technical, cognitive, and social aspects of working in digital spaces.

Given its evolving definition and expanding scope, digital literacy has become essential in navigating the demands of today's global industries. It has become increasingly relevant in the job market because of the rapid adoption of technology and evolving employer expectations. Kadhim (2024) highlights that digital literacy enhances workforce productivity, efficiency, and adaptability to technological advancements. Furthermore, it strengthens employability and economic opportunities in the modern workforce (Hussain & Phulpoto, 2024). People with advanced digital literacy tend to be more proficient at critical thinking and problem-solving, making it equally important in people's personal and professional lives. Digital literacy is also essential for social and political participation, as it influences one's ability to participate in online discussions and other social activities. It also aids in the secure and efficient use of digital resources for effective communication and online safety.

Nepal's Economic and Digital Landscape

Digital literacy is particularly important in developing countries like Nepal because it opens up new career opportunities, such as online work platforms, freelancing, and remote job opportunities that can pave paths to economic stability (Sato, 2024). In Nepal, a country in South Asia situated between India and China, the state of digital access and development of digital literacy is deeply influenced by its geography, economic conditions, and infrastructure. As of 2025, Nepal's GDP stands at approximately 46.08 billion USD, or about 6.15 trillion Nepali Rupees, with a per capita GDP of 1,460 USD (International Monetary Fund, 2025). The country's economy is heavily dependent on agriculture, tourism, remittances, and foreign aid. Remittances, which are earnings sent home by Nepalese citizens working abroad, contribute significantly to the national economy, accounting for 23% of Nepal's GDP in 2023, ranking it among the top ten countries in terms of remittance-to-GDP ratio (National Accounts Statistics Department, NSO, 2024; Ghimire, 2025). More than 6.3 million Nepalese citizens have gone abroad for employment, mainly to Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, due to a lack of sufficient employment opportunities within the country (Ghimire, 2025). This continuous outflow of youth and skilled workers to foreign countries has led to ongoing brain drain–the migration of educated and skilled workers abroad–and a high unemployment rate in the country, particularly as many students pursue education abroad and do not return (Kattel & Sapkota, 2018). Moreover, much of the income earned overseas is used for consumption rather than productive investment, reinforcing Nepal's economic vulnerability (Thapa & Acharya, 2017; Gaudel, 2006). These challenges highlight why digital literacy not only aids in a country's development but is also a potential solution, allowing young people to access global opportunities without leaving their country.

Since the introduction of the internet in 1993, Nepal has been making great progress in the digital world (Karki, 2019; Chand, Subin, & Maharjan, 2024). As of the beginning of 2025, 16.5 million people in the country are using the internet, accounting for 55.8% of the total population (Kemp, 2025). Mobile connectivity has also seen great progress, with the number of cellular mobile connections increasing by 2.0 million between 2024 and 2025, totaling 39.0 million connections. The broadband penetration rate, which refers to the number of high-speed internet subscriptions (such as mobile data or home WiFi) per 100 people, is relatively high. It currently stands at 144.56%, meaning that many individuals or households use multiple connections (for example, a mobile data plan in addition to a fixed wireless or fiber subscription).

According to UNICEF Nepal & ChildSafeNet (2024), mobile broadband continues to make great strides in the digital landscape, accounting for 95.49% of the total broadband subscriptions. However, this number reflects network availability and not actual digital engagement. Despite widespread connectivity, the actual digital literacy rate remains significantly lower, at around 31%, revealing a gap between access and meaningful use (Adhikari, 2024). This shows that having access to digital resources does not necessarily mean that the digital literacy rate of a particular area will increase. Although internet access is increasingly widespread, it is not being translated into educational or professional engagement for much of the population. Many people, especially in rural or marginalized communities, use digital tools mainly for social media or entertainment purposes due to limited skills and awareness.

The Digital Divide in Nepal

One of the barriers to increasing digital literacy in Nepal is the digital divide. The digital divide refers to the unequal access to digital technologies and the disparity in the ability to use them effectively between different groups of people, often shaped by factors such as geography, income, gender, education, and digital skills (Chand, Subin, & Maharjan, 2024). For example, in Nepal, a digital divide exists between rural and urban areas. According to Sato (2024), internet penetration in urban areas like Kathmandu is over 70%, while in many mountainous and rural parts of the country, the penetration rates are as low as 20%. This disparity is particularly caused by geographic and socioeconomic barriers, gender inequality, and poverty, which limit access to digital resources as well as the development of meaningful digital skills. However, access alone does not guarantee digital literacy. Many individuals in Nepal, especially in rural areas, may have internet access, but without the proper skills to use it effectively, they are unable to leverage digital tools for meaningful purposes. Joshi (2024) supports this by stating that many individuals use digital tools for social media or entertainment purposes rather than educational or professional development.

Compounding these issues are technological and infrastructural challenges, especially in geographically isolated regions. Nepal's challenging geographical terrain, especially in mountainous and remote rural regions, experiences significant power outages, unstable internet connections, and inadequate broadband coverage (Sato, 2024; Adhikari, 2024). Urban areas usually benefit from better digital infrastructure, including stable electricity and easier access to digital tools. In contrast, rural communities face various challenges, such as poor connectivity, lack of proper infrastructure, limited awareness of digital resources, and shortage of trained educators, which further widens the digital divide (Chand, Subin, & Maharjan, 2024).

A relevant example of this skills gap can be found in Nepal's education system. Educational barriers also further complicate the problem. Many individuals with limited educational backgrounds often find it difficult to navigate the digital landscape. Sato (2024) explains that in rural Nepal, many schools lack trained educators and sufficient digital learning resources, leaving students underprepared to engage in digital environments. Additionally, Saud (2021) found that many English teachers, particularly in rural schools, possess basic digital skills but struggle with advanced digital competencies such as software installation, troubleshooting, and integrating digital tools into teaching. These disadvantages affect students who rely on their teachers for exposure to technology.

The curricula in many educational institutions of Nepal are also outdated and not aligned with the demands of current job markets. The content being taught often fails to match the rapid technological advancements and the needs of the job market. This gap between education and industry requirements results in people lacking up-to-date skills and knowledge that employers seek, especially in the digital landscape, further worsening the divide (Sharma & Paudel, 2023). Moreover, Aryal (2024) also emphasizes that marginalized communities are rarely included in digital development efforts, resulting in more digital disparity. These challenges–including a lack of advanced digital skills in teachers, outdated curricula, and exclusion of marginalized groups–highlight the urgent need for targeted programs that focus on improving digital skills, providing adequate training, and ensuring equitable access to resources across various regions to build a more digitally inclusive Nepal. In response, government agencies, NGOs, INGOs, and educational institutes have made significant efforts, such as the Digital Nepal Framework-2019 and community-based digital workshops. However, despite these initiatives, progress remains uneven. Regions like Kathmandu keep benefiting from better infrastructure and support, while others continue to fall behind, which causes the national digital literacy average to remain lower (Sato, 2024).

One of the main reasons for the persistent digital divide in Nepal is the intersection of socioeconomic inequality and gender disparity. Individuals from higher-income households are significantly more likely to access the internet and digital resources compared to those from low-income backgrounds. According to Chand, Subin, and Maharjan (2024), people with higher socioeconomic status in Nepal are approximately 3.92 times more likely to have access to the internet than those from lower economic backgrounds. Moreover, the affordability of digital tools, resources, and internet packages remains a significant barrier for many, particularly in rural areas where economic opportunities are limited. This economic gap is further deepened by educational inequities, where individuals with lower educational backgrounds often face challenges accessing and navigating digital tools effectively.

Alongside income-based exclusion, gender inequality remains a major barrier, particularly in rural regions. As Sato (2024) explains, women are often restricted by traditional gender norms and reduced mobility, limiting their participation in digital spaces. In many rural communities, girls are often constrained by the belief that they should be restricted to household labor and farming, while boys are sent to school and encouraged to pursue careers (Adhikari, 2013). These social expectations reinforce the idea that a woman's role is primarily within the home, leading to fewer educational and technological opportunities for girls. Joshi (2024) adds that women often face disparity in access to digital education and economic opportunities because of socio-cultural, educational, and socioeconomic status. These socioeconomic and gender based inequalities work in tandem to deepen Nepal's digital divide, excluding women, low-income communities, as well as marginalized communities from educational, economic, and civic opportunities in the digital world.

In addition to socio-economic and gender disparities, several other barriers further limit digital inclusion in Nepal. Economic hardship remains one of the most significant challenges. Individuals with limited financial resources face significant barriers to acquiring digital devices and maintaining internet connectivity, making affordability a key constraint to meaningful digital engagement (Chand, Subin, & Maharjan, 2024). Joshi (2024) further supports this by noting that poverty continues to be a defining factor that restricts digital access, particularly in rural areas and marginalized regions. Additionally, language barriers and the scarcity of localized digital content make it difficult for users from indigenous or rural backgrounds to engage with digital platforms meaningfully. Caddell and Hall (2005) point out that even with diverse languages, about 123 spoken in Nepal, English continues to dominate as the primary medium of digital communication and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) instruction. It is the only language in which access is readily available, making it difficult for business, administration, and education, which takes place in Nepali and other local languages. This particularly burdens the individuals from indigenous and remote communities who have their own distinct identities and language. Together, these overlapping economic, educational, gender, language, and technological obstacles continue to marginalize many communities, limiting their ability to benefit from the opportunities of the digital age.

The Impact of Digital Literacy Gaps on Employment in Nepal

Despite the growing urgency to build a digitally inclusive society, the consequences of Nepal's digital divide are already being felt most visibly in the employment sector. Nepal's employment sector faces structural challenges that have left many job seekers, particularly the youth, without access to stable work. As Sharma and Paudel (2023) note, Nepal's youth unemployment rate was 20.36% in 2023, significantly higher than the national average of 12.6%. Additionally, the highest number of unemployed Nepalese individuals was found in the 15-24 years age group (KC, Dhakal, and Chettri, 2020). This reflects a mismatch between labor market needs and the skills provided in educational institutions. Sharma and Paudel (2023) state that the education system in Nepal heavily emphasizes theoretical knowledge while often neglecting the practical skills required in industries like information technology, which creates a critical mismatch between the skills provided by educational institutions and those demanded by the labour market. The Skills4Dev report by Elzir, A., & Morgandi (2024) supports this by stating that 92% of job postings now require some level of digital proficiency. This critical mismatch between skills taught in educational institutions and labor market needs, outdated curricula, and lack of vocational training make it difficult for youth to participate in employment activities. Moreover, sociocultural factors–such as preference for white-collar jobs (typically office-based or professional roles perceived as more prestigious)–further contribute to the problem, which may cause many youth to overlook vocational or digital job opportunities that may be more accessible and better suited to the current job market.

These factors have left many individuals without the qualifications needed to work locally, especially in digital roles. As a result, foreign labor migration has become a common choice for many. More than 450,000 Nepali youth migrate for work every year, often to Gulf countries, which has invited various risks such as brain drain and vulnerability to global economic changes (KC, Dhakal, & Chhetri, 2020). This trend is deeply connected to Nepal's dependence on the agricultural sector, which employs about 67% of the population (KC, Dhakal, & Chhetri, 2020). However, this sector is gradually shrinking due to modernization and economic transition, creating fewer jobs for youth who are already unprepared for digital or service-based roles. In other words, as the country shifts away from agriculture, a growing number of young people are left behind, especially from digital spaces, not because they lack the

opportunities, but because they lack the skills required to access them. According to Sato (2024), digital skills can open up online jobs, freelancing, and remote work opportunities, allowing people to earn income without leaving their country. However, when those skills are missing, many are forced to work abroad. This is why improving digital literacy is so important for not just adapting to the technological advancements and market needs but also for creating jobs at home and reducing the need to migrate.

A lack of digital literacy also has an impact on rural communities. According to Adhikari (2024), the digital divide reinforces unequal access to employment by favoring those in urban areas with better infrastructure and training. Aryal (2024) also argues that marginalized communities in Nepal are disproportionately excluded from digital employment opportunities due to gaps in training, access, and resources. As Paudel (2024) explains, many rural workers in Nepal are excluded from the growing gig economy because they lack these skills and aren't aware, limiting access to online jobs such as freelancing–temporary, self-employed work often done remotely via digital platforms–which include content creation, graphic design, virtual assistance, and software development. Furthermore, opportunities like ride-sharing or digital commerce also remain accessible only within the urban areas. This further indicates how digital literacy has become a crucial determinant of employability. This situation is worsened by the digital shift in the global job market. Shrestha (2018) emphasises that employees today must be able to navigate digital technologies, critically evaluate information, and apply digital tools to diverse work environments–skills that are often lacking. Wang, Yi and Yang (2024) argue that digital skills enhance non-farm employment by increasing job chances by 4.4%, demonstrating the importance of digital literacy.

While the growing demands of digital skills are clear in today's job market, many individuals in Nepal are still far from prepared to meet them. The absence of digital infrastructures, education, and limited exposure to relevant tools has created a huge gap between technological advancements and workforce readiness. Wang, Yi, and Yang (2024) state that low digital literacy makes it difficult for individuals, particularly rural workforce, to participate in the digital economy. Hussain and Phulpoto (2024) add that people with strong digital literacy tend to have better career opportunities and are more prepared to adjust to technological advancements in the workplace, indicating that a lack of digital literacy significantly impacts the work skills of employees. Likewise, Kadhim (2024) and Elzir & Morgandi (2024) stress that digital literacy is a foundational skill in the modern workforce, improving productivity and economic participation. Yet, access to these opportunities in Nepal continues to be uneven.

Nepal's Efforts to Bridge the Digital Divide

In response to the growing importance of digital literacy and its connection to employment, several policies have been introduced in Nepal to promote digital inclusion. One of the most notable policy initiatives is the Digital Nepal Framework, launched by the government of Nepal in 2019. This framework aims to promote digital literacy across various sectors such as education, business, and healthcare by providing comprehensive policies that emphasize digital skills as well as digital infrastructures. It also focuses on providing internet access equally across Nepal and integrating digital literacy into the national curriculum (Sato, 2024). Sato further elaborates on the role of NGOs and INGOs in promoting digital literacy in Nepal. UNESCO and UNICEF have been instrumental in supporting digital educational initiatives, while organizations like the World Bank have provided funding for digital infrastructure projects in Nepal. While the Digital Nepal framework is well-structured and intricate, its implementation faces several challenges due to budget constraints and the difficulty of reaching remote regions of Nepal. Furthermore, even though implementation progress has been made in Nepal, such as the

integration of ICT tools in schools and awareness campaigns regarding the importance of digital skills, the efforts have not been equally effective across the country. The benefits remain unevenly distributed, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, highlighting the need for stronger and targeted implementation strategies.

Proposed Solutions for Digital Inclusion

To further bridge the digital divide, researchers and policy experts have proposed targeted solutions. Sato (2024) recommends prioritising localized digital literacy programs for women, marginalized communities, and low-income groups to address the socioeconomic gaps. Sato also highlights the importance of investing in teacher training programs, which equip teachers with skills and resources for integrating technology into the curriculum, which improves students' digital competency. Similarly, Gajurel (2023) emphasizes the need to invest in expanding ICT infrastructure across all the regions of Nepal, fostering public-private partnerships to mobilize resources and encourage the development of digital content in local languages, making it accessible throughout different local groups of Nepal.

Joshi (2024) supports these ideas by suggesting that the government and civil society organizations collaborate more effectively by improving infrastructure, creating strong policies, and focusing on raising awareness and sharing education about digital skills through digital literacy training programs. Furthermore, Aryal (2024) advocates that effective digital inclusion efforts must adopt a grassroots-centric approach, one that actively involves local communities in shaping solutions tailored to their contexts. Moreover, to ensure the effectiveness of digital access, a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework should also be established, focusing on indicators such as increased access to information, enhanced civic participation, and economic opportunities. Gajurel (2023) further emphasizes that digital inclusion cannot rely solely on government or private sector efforts; community-based organizations should also take ownership of digital projects and ensure sustainability through their active involvement. These combined recommendations make it evident that true digital inclusion requires not just technological expansion, but intentional, localized, community-rooted strategies that equip individuals with the skills to fully participate in the digital economy.

Building a Digitally Inclusive Future for Nepal

To address the challenges outlined in this literature review, Nepal must pursue a multi-faceted approach aimed at making digital literacy more equitable and accessible. Integrating digital skills into the national education curriculum–from primary school through higher education–should be a top priority. Additionally, targeted programs tailored for women, people from marginalized communities, and economically disadvantaged groups must be expanded and made more flexible, allowing for accessibility across different learning levels and life circumstances. To make these efforts sustainable, the government should build stronger partnerships with the private sector, international organizations, and educational institutions to design and provide market-relevant training that aligns with the evolving job landscape. Furthermore, promoting policies that support digital entrepreneurship and remote work opportunities is also crucial. Equal access to the internet and devices must be guaranteed by investing in digital infrastructures, especially in geographically challenging regions such as mountainous regions, to bridge the rural-urban divide.

One often overlooked but equally important issue is language. Many digital tools and resources are usually available only in English or standard Nepali, making them inaccessible to people who speak indigenous or minority languages. And in a country where 124 languages are spoken, making digital literacy and access truly inclusive is a necessity. To achieve this,

resources, training programs, and awareness campaigns need to be developed in multiple local languages so that everyone, regardless of their background, can enjoy and participate equally and meaningfully in the digital space. Furthermore, many individuals from rural areas and low-income backgrounds face issues with the affordability of digital devices or internet packages. Ensuring the affordability of devices and the internet should, therefore, remain a priority. Additionally, there should be initiatives promoting awareness of how digital tools can be used not just for entertainment, but for learning, work, and civic engagement. To understand what's working and where gaps remain, the government should consistently conduct nationwide surveys that not only track internet access but also examine how people are actually using digital tools or how digitally literate they are–paying close attention to differences in gender, region, education level, caste, or ethnic groups. Lastly, local communities must be a part of the solution. Local-level organizations and grassroots groups should be empowered and supported to take an active role in designing and running digital literacy programs. These efforts should be inclusive, respectful, and responsive to the needs of the people they aim to serve.

Discussion

This literature review demonstrates the intersection of digital literacy and employment in Nepal, revealing how limited digital skills significantly affect job accessibility, deepen the rural-urban digital divide, and contribute to the country's dependence on foreign labour. Although Nepal has made considerable strides in the digital world with high internet penetration and mobile connectivity, these advancements have not translated into meaningful digital inclusion for many, especially those in rural, low-income, or marginalized communities. This is due to factors such as limited digital infrastructure, poverty, language barriers, and gender inequality, which restrict digital engagement. As employers increasingly demand digital proficiency, many job seekers, particularly youth, women, and those from marginalized communities, remain unprepared due to outdated curricula, a lack of digital training, and a lack of vocational programs. This mismatch between education and labor market needs has forced many young Nepalis to seek employment abroad, contributing to brain drain and overreliance on remittances. Compounding this issue is the fact that digital access does not always equate to digital literacy, as many individuals use the internet and digital devices for entertainment or social media rather than for learning, entrepreneurship, or skill development. As a result, emerging sectors like the gig economy, which rely heavily on digital engagement, are largely inaccessible to rural and low-income populations, further deepening employment inequality across the country.

Despite growing recognition of digital literacy's importance, many important questions remain unanswered. For instance, there is still very limited research that examines how digital literacy specifically affects job opportunities, especially across different regions and social groups. While a few papers touch on this connection, most fail to dive deeply into how digital skill gaps are shaping employment outcomes, job opportunities, or workforce participation. Similarly, there is limited investigation into how digital skill gaps drive the country's heavy dependence on foreign employment and remittances. Without the ability to compete in Nepal's evolving job market, many young people are left with the option to migrate abroad for work. In addition, there is a clear need for more accurate and up-to-date assessments of Nepal's digital literacy rates and the effectiveness of current initiatives aimed at improving them. At the same time, not much has been done to track how digital literacy varies across different demographics, such as rural vs. urban populations, caste groups, marginalized communities, or gender, and how these differences affect access to employment.

Another underexplored area is the perspective of employers themselves–what digital competencies they expect, and how they view the preparedness of the local workforce. Although there are papers that explore how digital literacy improves employability, there is still insufficient research and understanding of how digital literacy can help reduce youth unemployment, especially in rural and marginalized communities. Moreover, while various digital training programs have been introduced in Nepal in recent years, there is insufficient evaluation of whether they close skill gaps or lead to meaningful employment. Additionally, there is a lack of data-driven research or analysis that measures the state of digital access across regions; while many studies acknowledge the rural-urban divide, few provide specific, empirical evidence to clearly show how big the gap is. Finally, more comprehensive tracking of government initiatives, such as the Digital Nepal Framework 2019, is needed to measure their reach and impact.

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