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**Negotiating Digital Learning and Educational Struggles: Experiences of Dalit Girls
in the Faculty of Education at Mahendra Multiple Campus, Dharan**

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Abstract

Digital learning is very common in higher education in Nepal. This paper examines the experiences of Dalit girls in digital learning at Mahendra Multiple Campus, Dharan. The objective of the study was to explore what challenges Dalit girls face during digital learning. The study applies a generic qualitative research design; two Dalit girls studying at the B.Ed. and M.Ed. levels were selected purposively. Data were collected through in-depth interviews. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings of the study show that digital learning helped students to be confident and independent learners. Students used various search engines, social platforms, and AI tools to learn lessons and complete assignments. Digital learning helped them in many ways, however, they also faced different challenges. Their long screen time caused eye problems and headaches. Load shedding, slow internet, and poor digital infrastructure of the campus created problems in learning.

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Students experienced that their teachers helped them less and their peers more. The paper concludes that digital learning supports Dalit girls from different perspectives, but strong institutional support is necessary.

Keywords: Digital Learning, Dalit Girls, Higher Education, Educational Challenges, Digital Learning Experiences

Introduction

Digital learning has become an integral part of students' learning experiences in higher education. Using online learning platforms, the internet, mobile phones, computers, and digital tools to support their learning activities is related to 'digital learning'. Digital learning (d-learning) is used in a complementary way to mean technological learning (Basak et al., 2018). Many Universities and colleges around the world now use online classes through digital resources and learning applications to improve learning experiences. Digital learning mainly allows students to get information quickly and learn it at their own pace and place, and study beyond the classroom (Means et al., 2010). Because of these benefits, digital learning is often seen as productive, flexible, and learner friendly.

In recent years, the concept and use of digital learning have been growing rapidly in developing countries like Nepal. During and after the COVID-19 crisis, use of digital learning increased because educational institutions were forced to shift to online classes. Different online platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Meet, and Google Classroom became common in higher education of Nepal. Teachers as well as students began using their mobile phones and laptops for Google search, YouTube videos, and artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT to support their studies. However, not all teachers and students can equally benefit from digital learning. When access to devices, internet facilities, electricity, and digital skills remains uneven,

or in other words, access to quality internet and devices hinders students' participation in digital learning (Van Dijk, 2020). Because of this, some learners face serious challenges while using digital tools for education.

In Nepal, Dalit students come from socially marginalized communities. Many Dalit girls face multiple forms of disadvantage due to caste, gender, poverty, and limited educational support. According to Dash (2025) "Dalit women face both caste-based and gender-based discrimination in our country." At the bachelor level, in their learning journey, Dalit girls struggle with academic pressure, lack of resources, and low confidence. When digital learning is also involved, the challenges may increase rather than decrease. Although digital learning promises flexibility and independence, it also demands digital devices, digital skills, stable internet, and supportive institutional systems.

There were some previous studies about girls, Dalit girls, and how they use digital technologies in learning. They show that students from disadvantaged backgrounds often experience a digital divide (Dash, 2025). Most of them live in rural and geographically remote areas. Such students may not have fast internet, smartphones, laptops and proper guidance from teachers. If they find smartphones, they don't have an idea about how they can use phones in their learning, and they only use them for Facebook, TikTok, etc. In addition to this, heavy usage of mobile devices may reduce social interaction and increase isolation (Baecker et al., 2014). Despite these different research works, there is limited research focusing specifically on Dalit girls' experiences of digital learning in Nepali higher education. Their voices are often missing in academic discussions. So, this study focuses on that gap with some suggestions.

This study focuses on Dalit girls studying at Mahendra Multiple Campus (MMC), Dharan. They are currently studying at the B.Ed. and M.Ed. levels. The objective of the study is to explore their experiences with digital learning and the Karki (2026). *Negotiating Digital Learning . . .*

challenges they face. The study also concerns how institutional factors such as teachers' feedback and guidance, peer support, digital infrastructure, etc., determine their learning experiences. By finding out their different experiences, this study aims to present a clear picture of digital learning from the findings of the research and from the perspective of Dalit girls. These findings may be important for improving digital learning practices in higher education institutions in Nepal. The study is guided by the research questions: How do Dalit girls describe (un)pleasant experiences with digital learning? And how do institutional circumstances such as classroom support, digital infrastructure, and teacher guidance shape their digital learning experiences?

Methods and Materials

This study follows a basic or generic qualitative research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I chose a generic qualitative research design for this study because it aims to explore personal experiences, feelings, and perceptions of Dalit girls related to digital learning. Qualitative research helps researchers to understand how people make meaning of their experiences in real-life contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since this study focuses on learning experiences and institutional support, qualitative inquiry is suitable. My study adopts a phenomenological approach, which focuses on understanding the lived experiences of individuals related to a specific phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, the phenomenon is digital learning and struggle. In this research, I attempt to explore how Dalit girls experience digital learning in their academic life, i.e., in their day-to-day learning.

I selected two Dalit girls as the participants of the study who were studying in the B.Ed. and M.Ed. at Mahendra Multiple Campus, Dharan. The campus is a constituent campus of Tribhuvan University. I selected the campus and these participants purposively. This purposive sampling helped me to select those students who had direct experience with digital learning and belonged to Dalit communities. The Karki (2026). Negotiating Digital Learning . . .

participants had experience of using digital devices such as mobile phones, laptops, the internet, Zoom, Google search, YouTube, and AI tools like ChatGPT and DeepSeek, etc. Participants had also attended online classes during the COVID-19 period.

For this research, I collected data through in-depth interviews with selected students. Interviews allowed participants to express their experiences freely and share their personal experiences. Both of the students (respondents) were my students of major English, and I informed them about my research. They easily agreed to an interview. Then I arranged the interview in their leisure period, about 60 minutes for each student separately. As my regular students, there was no difficulty in rapport building, and they expressed their experiences openly. The interviews were conducted in a comfortable environment at the corner of the campus ground. Participants were allowed to use Nepali during the interview. I recorded both of the interviews with participants' consent, and later they were transcribed and coded for analysis. Open-ended and free questions were used to encourage detailed responses. Participants were asked about their use of digital tools, learning benefits, challenges, health issues, state of internet access, teacher support, peer support in digital learning, and teacher guidance.

After taking interviews, I transcribed those recordings, playing them at a slow speed. Then I read transcripts again and again to generate codes. Numerous codes were generated from meaningful and key statements related to their digital learning experiences. The formed similar codes were grouped into themes. It suggests that the collected data through interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The prepared similar codes were grouped into themes. Two themes were developed for each research question. For Research Question 1, the themes were: 'Flexibility and Self-directed Learning', and 'Health, Dependency, and Being Unsocial'. Similarly, for Research Question 2, the themes were: 'Inadequate Digital Infrastructure and Institutional Support', and 'Platform Accessibility and Peer-based Support.' The

thematic data were analysed, being focused on describing experiences by students in simple and clear language while linking findings in the discussion.

For this research, ethical issues were carefully maintained. Before the interview, participants were clearly informed about the purpose of the study and provided information used just for research. My participants were voluntarily involved in the interview. Pseudonyms such as Student A and Student B were used to protect their identity.

Results and Discussion

As previously mentioned, transcribed data were coded, grouped, and thematized under two research questions, which are described below.

Dalit Girls' Experience with Digital Learning

Digital learning has grown to be an integral aspect of Dalit girls' learning experiences, because they enable the flexibility in learning resource access. They became confident and independent in their learning as they became used to digital tools. But the positive sides came with the problems of health, technology reliance, and lowered social interaction.

Flexibility and Self-directed Learning

Higher-level students began digital learning with little knowledge, but gradually learned to use it for their studies. When students got admitted to the bachelor level, they were (un)familiar/ less familiar with digital learning and online tools. In recent years, they started using mobile phones and laptops for learning purposes. When their teachers clarified topics in their class, and they didn't understand the lesson descriptions, they used Google to search for the information quickly. On this, one student (Student A) stated, "If I do not understand the lesson in class, I search that in Google and sometimes I get more knowledge than in class." Similarly, YouTube videos helped them understand Karki (2026). Negotiating Digital Learning . . .

difficult topics through examples and explanations. One of the students replied, " In my M. Ed. first semester, we had to write a term paper, I had no idea before, then I searched about the topic and format on the internet, learned how to write it and what format it had." Some students also used ChatGPT or DeepSeek to get ideas and explanations. These tools made learning easier because students did not have to depend only on classroom teaching. They could find answers by themselves and learn new things step by step. Digital learning also helped them feel more comfortable with technology over time. Stokes (2001) also adds digital learning environment is successful, satisfying, and helpful in understanding. Thus, even without prior knowledge, digital tools helped Dalit girls begin learning independently and flexibly.

Digital learning helped Dalit girls become confident and self-directed in learning their lessons. If learners have to learn things, they could learn anywhere, anything, without time limits. Such things made learning more flexible. Student A said, "When I use mobile apps, I can learn anytime I want. There is no time limit. If I do not understand something, I can search immediately and learn." When they were confused in class, they could search for the same topic at home and understand it better. Digital tools were very useful for academic work, such as writing term papers. Student A again stated, "In my M. Ed. first semester, we had to write a term paper, I had no idea before, then I searched on Google and YouTube and learned how to write it and what points to include." Students learned how to write, format, and organize their work by watching videos and reading online materials. Spires et al. (2012) also stated that video viewing and creation are ways to engage students in learning, where students self-organize their resources in a meaningful way. They no longer felt completely lost when given new academic tasks. Learning at their own pace and time helped them feel less pressure. Such facility of devices and the internet, students felt more confident and self-directed in learning. Student B replied, "Sir, when I use mobile apps, whenever I feel

like learning, I can learn. There's no time limit. If I don't know something, I can search and watch or learn right away." After that they felt more confident in their ability to learn independently. As a result, digital learning increased students' confidence and supported self-directed learning.

Health, Dependency, and Unsociability

Dalit girls experienced health-related problems due to the prolonged use of digital devices. They spent many hours on mobile phones and laptops for learning (and other tasks). This long screen time caused eye problems and headaches. Student A reported, "I have some eye problems, like if I use the phone and look at the screen for a long time, my eyeballs get sore and my head aches." Filkina et al. (2020) also support this view by saying long-term use of digital devices may cause different eye diseases. Some students felt tired after using digital devices for a long time. These health problems make learning uncomfortable and stressful. Continuous screen use also reduces their physical movement. Hamer and Stamatakis (2013) also describe how increased screen time lowers physical activity, i.e., which may cause laziness and weight gain. Over time, such health issues affected their concentration and motivation to study. Therefore, digital learning created health challenges that made learning difficult at times.

Digital learning increased dependency and reduced social interaction. Students became more dependent on the internet for their learning. When the internet was not available, they felt less confident and worried about their studies. On the same issue, Student B said, "Sometimes there is no internet on campus and at home also, I couldn't complete my given task. At that time, I only think if the internet were available, I would learn many things." Many students felt they could not study properly or complete home assignments without online access. Anderson and Perrin (2018) concluded, "Learners are often or sometimes unable to complete homework assignments because they do not Karki (2026). Negotiating Digital Learning . . .

have reliable access to a computer or internet." They looked just addict on internet, and they mostly depend on it for different activities. Similarly, heavy use of mobile devices also reduced students' face-to-face interaction with family members, teachers and classmates. Student A reported a similar view as " There are many disadvantages of using the internet, there may be health issues like eye pain, and less interaction with family, teachers and friends." Students felt less connected with others during digital learning. Group discussion and personal interaction became limited. This made learning feel lonely and less social. Thus, digital learning led to dependency, reduced confidence, and weaker social interaction.

Institutional Infrastructure and Digital Learning Experiences

Institutional infrastructure is one of the key factors that can significantly impact students' digital learning experiences, affecting their digital learning resources, access to the internet, and access to technology. While online platforms were introduced at higher education institutions, Zoom, MS Teams, and Google Meet, inadequate internet facilities, the lack of computer laboratories, and limited support from the institutions often compromise participation in online learning. To face such challenges, students used platforms that were easy to access as well as peers, showing the importance of institutional infrastructure and collaborative support to support meaningful and equitable digital learning experiences.

Inadequate Digital Infrastructure and Institutional Support

Infrastructural problems of the campus strongly affected students' digital learning experiences. In our context, most online classes were started during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most popular online platforms for such classes were Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet. Student B stated, "We took class on Zoom which is easier to connect and use in comparison to Microsoft Teams and Google Meet." But

Student A had the experience with Teams, and their teacher joined them through Teams. However, many students faced internet problems at home. Power cuts and weak internet are often problematic when taking classes. Household noise also disturbed students during online learning. Student A reported, " I have low power internet at my home which is disrupted most of the time, and there are other problems, such as household noises, pets and animals' noises, load shedding, etc., which disturb the classes most of the time." These problems made it hard for students to focus and participate actively. Zaki (2022) found that learners were more easily distracted in online learning than in traditional or face-to-face learning. Many students missed important lessons due to technical issues. As a result, online learning became stressful instead of helpful. Therefore, poor home infrastructure reduced the quality of digital learning.

Lack of digital infrastructure also limited the effectiveness of digital learning. If the higher education institutions cannot provide fast internet facilities and adequate computer infrastructure, it hinders students' learning experiences. Students of the Campus shared their experiences about the internet facility, i.e., the WiFi did not give sufficient range in all classrooms. In this regard, Student A shared, " Sir, we connected to campus Wi-Fi in the first and second semesters, but the router was far from our room and the range wasn't good in our class; it was slow. If the campus provided faster Wi-Fi, it would be easier for us." Students experienced frequent disconnections while trying to use the campus internet. Similarly, there was no computer lab available for students. Because of this, students had to bring their own laptops or use mobile phones for online learning. Another student said, " If the campus provided facility of computer lab, it would be easier for everyone because some students might not have laptops and good mobile phones to connect. An interactive board is there on campus near our classroom, but we never used that." It also seems that carrying personal devices was not always easy or possible for all learners. Conrad et al. (2022) also found out " Higher education

institutions continuously face difficulties in creating satisfactory online learning experiences that adhere to the new norms." So, from the side of students, they felt that strong campus internet facilities and computers would help everyone to use and learn equally. Thus, weak campus infrastructure created barriers to digital learning.

Platform Accessibility and Peer-based Support

Students preferred digital platforms that were easy and accessible. Among different platforms, Zoom was preferred because it worked even with slow internet. Students found Zoom easier to access compared to Teams and Google Meet. Student B stated, "We took class on Zoom, because it is easier to use and it works even with slow internet. Teams and Google Meet need faster internet." Data-heavy platforms for learning as LMS, Moodle, Teams, etc., require a strong internet connection, which many students might not have. When such learning Apps are difficult to use, students feel frustrated in learning new things. Easy platforms helped students attend classes regularly and understand lessons better. Ismail et al. (2022) also suggest that the usability of Zoom and Teams in higher education is appreciable because they are considered intuitive and easy for learners. Therefore, platform accessibility played an important role in digital learning.

In the case of using and learning via digital devices and platforms, peer support was more helpful than teachers' guidance. Students often depended on friends to learn how to search for information and use digital tools. One of the students said, "I don't have the Teams app on my phone, my friend helps me to register, use the app, its features, and even search for the materials uploaded by teachers." According to students, teachers' guidance is very limited. When teachers are unavailable, their friends explain how to use apps and solve technical problems. They work in groups on using learning apps, learning possibilities, and they also get help from YouTube videos for using digital devices and digital learning. They reported teacher guidance for digital learning was Karki (2026). Negotiating Digital Learning . . .

limited. Students felt they had to manage learning on their own. Peer help made learning easier and less stressful. Bariyyah (2015) stated about the role of peer learning as "peer-helping is effective to reduce students' academic stress collaboratively... by giving effective information with language that is easily understood." As a result, peer support became a key source of help in digital learning.

Discussion

The results demonstrate that Dalit girls gained flexibility, confidence and the ability to learn at their own pace with digital learning. Over time, the students were able to achieve self-reliance in their learning and increase independence by making use of digital resources, including Google, YouTube, and AI applications, to grasp lessons, complete assignments, and perform academic tasks. The results indicate that digital technologies can be used to support learner autonomy by facilitating access to resources at any time and learning at any speed. Such conclusions have been drawn by Stokes (2001), who noted that digital learning provides important ways to enhance learning experiences, and Spires et al. (2012), who reported that digital resources create an incentive for independent and meaningful learning. Similarly, the results corroborate the claim that digital technologies are beneficial in facilitating the engagement of learners with academic activities and boosting their academic confidence when suitable learning resources are provided (Ismail et al., 2022).

The study, however, revealed the following challenges that made digital learning less effective. High levels of screen time led to eye strain and headaches, limited internet connectivity and computer facilities and institutional support hampered learning. Students also found that they were highly dependent on the Internet and received more calls from friends than from their teachers for technical advice. This study shows that in addition to the students' motivation, good infrastructure and institutional support are also crucial to effective digital learning. The realization that Karki (2026). *Negotiating Digital Learning* . . .

screen time is an unfavorable health risk has been echoed by Filkina et al. (2020), and that institutions need to be ready and able to support quality online learning by Conrad et al. (2022). Promoting the improvement of digital infrastructure, the strengthening of teacher support and equal access to technology are therefore crucial to developing inclusive and effective digital learning spaces for marginalized students.

Conclusion

The study about digital learning of Dalit girls studying in MMC, Dharan, found that in higher education, digital learning had positive and negative sides. It helped students to learn by themselves using digital devices and the internet. For this purpose, students mainly used Google, YouTube, and AI tools to make their learning easy and accessible. Students used their mobile phones as a simple tool that they can use anytime, anywhere, easily. Different digital tools, mainly YouTube, were very helpful for them to prepare for the examination and write term papers as well. Such devices not only help them in learning and exam preparation but also develop confidence in their knowledge. However, in students' digital lives, it also created some problems. For example, when they engaged with the screen for a long time, it caused eye pain and headaches. Similarly, learners became more dependent on the internet, which lessened their creativity and physical activity. They became habituated to the digital world. As a result, even a temporary loss of internet access made them feel stressed and helpless. Likewise, digital learning also reduced social relationships and face-to-face interaction with family members, teachers, and friends.

Students stated they got weaker institutional support for digital learning. There was the facility of internet access, but the WiFi was very weak and did not reach all the classrooms well. The computer lab was not installed for the education students. Instead of them, they also have challenges at their home, such as load shedding, slow home internet, household noises, etc., disturbed online classes and their digital learning. Dalit Karki (2026). Negotiating Digital Learning . . .

students had limited experiences of teacher guidance in digital learning. Instead of teachers' support, students depended more on friends than teachers on using devices and the way of using digital learning platforms. Their peer learners helped them downloading apps and better ways of using digital tools in completing tasks and exam preparations.

Implications of the Study

This research work has significant meaning for learners, campuses and teachers. Proper digital learning helps marginalized students to be independent learners. From the side of academic institutions, just giving online classes is not enough; they must facilitate fast and reachable internet, computers, faculty support, and teacher training for handling a digital-based environment. Teachers of the campus should also guide students properly in digital learning. Nowadays, there is a big issue of the digital divide, which creates a greater gap among the graduates. So, without equal access and facilities for digital, information and communication technology, the digital gap between learners will grow bigger. Higher-level learners from geographically and socially marginalized groups and from poor families will remain behind. Dalit and poor girls should be provided extra support and encouragement from the side of teachers and the Campus, and findings of such research studies should be applied by related authorities.

Delimitations of the Study

This study was mainly limited to the following:

- Only two Dalit girls who were studying at MMC, Dharan were included.
- As the sample was small, the findings cannot represent and generalizable for all Dalit girls.
- The study was done in MMC, Dharan only.
- Data were collected through interviews only.

- Other methods, like observation, were not used.
- There was the possibility of not sharing all their negative experiences because the researcher was their own teacher.

Future Research Directions

This study tries to fill the knowledge gap in the field of digital learning and the struggles among Dalit girls studying in MMC, Dharan. But there are some areas that still remain for future studies that can improve the research in this field. Some of them are as follows.

- Dalit girls from other higher-level institutions can be included as respondents
- For far better findings, both male and female Dalit students can be studied.
- Apart from in-depth interviews, other data collection methods like surveys and classroom observation can be used.
- This study only covers students' experiences, but teachers' views on digital learning can also be explored.
- In future research, researchers can include a comparison between the experiences of learners studying in rural and urban campuses.

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