

DIGITAL DIVIDE, GENDER, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY IN PAKISTANI HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the intersection of the digital divide, gender, and educational inequality in Pakistani higher education, focusing on how digitalization reshapes access, participation, and academic outcomes. Employing a qualitative research design, data were collected through purposive sampling of peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and theoretical analyses relevant to digital access, gendered educational practices, and institutional dynamics. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, leading to the identification of eight major themes: unequal access to digital infrastructure, gendered digital access and control, digital literacy gaps, socio-cultural norms and mobility constraints, institutional preparedness and pedagogical inequalities, participation and engagement, intersectionality and compounded disadvantages, and the reproduction or transformation of educational inequality. Findings indicate that structural disparities in technology access, coupled with gendered social norms and limited institutional support, reproduce existing hierarchies and marginalize female and disadvantaged students. However, digital platforms also present opportunities for inclusion and empowerment once paired with gender-sensitive policies and inclusive pedagogical strategies. The study underscores the need for comprehensive interventions addressing technological, social, and institutional barriers to ensure equitable participation in digitally mediated higher education.

Keywords: Digital Divide, Gender, Educational Inequality, Higher Education, Digital Literacy, Intersectionality

Introduction

The rapid integration of digital technologies into higher education has reconfigured the landscape of teaching, learning, and knowledge production (Bourdieu, 1986; Van Dijk, 2005). Nonetheless, this transformation has not been evenly distributed, giving rise to what is widely conceptualized as the digital divide and a multidimensional disparity in access to devices, internet connectivity, digital literacy, and meaningful technological engagement (Connell,

2009; Crenshaw, 1991). Inside the context of higher education, these inequalities are deeply embedded in existing socio-economic and institutional structures, shaping to participate effectively in digitally mediated academic environments (Sen, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). The expansion of online learning platforms, learning management systems, and virtual collaboration tools has intensified reliance on digital resources (Ali, Abdullah, & Shoaib, 2026a; Shoaib, Ali, Hassan, & Abdullah, 2026), thereby amplifying

structural inequities among students across urban-rural, class, and institutional divides (Shoaib, Abbas, Ali, & Abdullah, 2026; Shoaib, Ali, Ditta, & Abdullah, 2026).

Gender further complicates this digital stratification, intersecting with cultural norms, mobility constraints, and differential access to resources to produce distinct patterns of educational disadvantage (Shoaib, Abdullah, & Ali, 2026; Shoaib, Noor, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026). Female students in Pakistan often encounter layered barriers, including restricted access to personal digital devices (Ali, Shoaib, Shamraiz, & Abdullah, 2026; Shoaib, Noor, Mir, & Abdullah, 2026), limited autonomy over internet usage, and socio-cultural expectations that prioritize domestic responsibilities over academic engagement (Shoaib, Shamraiz, Noor, & Abdullah, 2026; Shoaib, Srosh, Mobeen, & Abdullah, 2026a). These constraints not only hinder their participation in digital learning spaces but also reinforce broader processes of educational inequality and social reproduction (Abdullah & Shoaib, 2021; Shoaib, Srosh, Mobeen, & Abdullah, 2026b). Consequently, the digital divide in Pakistani higher education has to be understood not merely as a technological gap but as a socially constructed phenomenon, where gender operates as a critical axis shaping access, agency, and academic outcomes in an increasingly digitized educational setting (Shoaib & Ullah, 2019; Ullah & Shoaib, 2021).

Study Context

The rapid digitization of higher education in Pakistan has introduced new modalities of teaching and learning (Shoaib, Abdullah, & Baneen, 2026b; Shoaib, Shamraiz, Baneen, & Abdullah, 2026c), yet it has simultaneously exposed and intensified pre-existing inequalities within the system (Shoaib, Shamraiz, Baneen, & Abdullah, 2026a, 2026d). However, universities increasingly rely on digital platforms, online resources, and virtual pedagogies, a significant proportion of students remain unevenly positioned in terms of access to technological infrastructure (Shoaib, Abdullah, & Baneen, 2026a), digital skills, and stable internet

connectivity (Shoaib, Shamraiz, Baneen, & Abdullah, 2026b). This digital divide is not merely technical but structurally embedded (Shoaib, Iqbal, Baneen, & Abdullah, 2026c), reflecting broader socio-economic disparities between urban and rural regions, public and private institutions, and different social classes (Shoaib, Abdullah, & Baneen, 2026c). As a result, students' ability to participate effectively in academic processes, access knowledge, and achieve educational success is increasingly mediated by their digital capital (Shoaib, Iqbal, Baneen, & Abdullah, 2026b).

Inside this unequal digital landscape, gender emerges as a critical axis of differentiation that shapes access, usage, and outcomes in higher education (Shoaib, Iqbal, Baneen, & Abdullah, 2026a). Female students in Pakistan often face compounded constraints rooted in patriarchal norms, limited mobility, restricted ownership of digital devices, and socio-cultural expectations that deprioritize their educational engagement (Larijani, Shoaib, & Abedi, 2026; Shoaib, Shamraiz, Abdullah, & Shahzadi, 2026a). These gendered barriers not only limit their participation in online and blended learning environments but also reinforce patterns of exclusion and marginalization in academic spaces (Shamraiz, Shoaib, Baneen, & Shahzadi, 2026a; Shoaib, Shamraiz, Abdullah, & Shahzadi, 2026b). Regardless of the growing centrality of digital technologies in education, there remains insufficient empirical and theoretical attention to how the intersection of digital inequality and gender reshapes educational disparities in Pakistani higher education (Shamraiz, Shoaib, Baneen, & Shahzadi, 2026b; Shoaib & Ullah, 2026). Hence, this study seeks to address this gap by examining how the digital divide, mediated by gendered structures and practices, transforms access, participation, and academic outcomes among university students in Pakistan.

The Data and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the interplay of the digital divide, gender, and educational inequality in Pakistani higher education. Data were collected through purposive sampling of published research

documents, including peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and theoretical analyses, selected for their direct relevance to digital access, gendered educational practices, and institutional dynamics in higher education. The inclusion criteria prioritized studies that provided empirical evidence or conceptual insights into technological disparities, socio-cultural constraints, and pedagogical inequities affecting students' participation and learning outcomes. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following a systematic process of iterative coding, categorization, and pattern identification. Initial codes were generated from textual content, which were then refined and clustered to form broader themes reflecting key dimensions of the digital divide and its gendered implications. This iterative process enabled the derivation of eight major themes: unequal access to digital infrastructure, gendered digital access and control, digital literacy gaps, socio-cultural norms and mobility constraints, institutional preparedness and pedagogical inequalities, participation and engagement, intersectionality and compounded disadvantages, and the reproduction or transformation of educational inequality. Thematic analysis allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how structural, social, and technological factors interact to shape educational inequalities in Pakistan, providing a nuanced basis for the study's findings and conclusions.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Unequal Access to Digital Infrastructure

Unequal access to digital infrastructure in Pakistani higher education reflects deep-seated structural disparities that shape students' entry into and engagement with digital learning environments (Shoaib, Shahzadi, & Abdullah, 2026; Shoaib, Shahzadi, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026). Access to essential resources including personal laptops, smartphones, stable internet connectivity, and uninterrupted electricity remains unevenly distributed across socio-economic and geographic lines (Shahzadi, Shoaib, & Abdullah, 2026; Shoaib, Shahzadi, Shamraiz, & Abdullah, 2026a). Students in urban centers

and private universities are more likely to benefit from high-speed internet and institutional technological support (Shoaib, Shahzadi, Shamraiz, & Abdullah, 2026b), whereas those in rural areas and public sector institutions often rely on limited or shared resources (Shahzadi, Shoaib, Baneen, & Abdullah, 2026). This infrastructural imbalance constrains students' ability to attend online classes, access digital libraries (Shoaib, Shahzadi, Shamraiz, & Abdullah, 2026c), and participate in virtual academic activities, thereby creating asymmetrical learning opportunities and outcomes (Shahzadi, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026).

These disparities are not merely logistical but have broader implications for educational inequality and academic performance (Shoaib, Iqbal, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026a). Limited access to reliable digital infrastructure disrupts continuity in learning, reduces engagement, and contributes to lower academic confidence among disadvantaged students (Waris, Shoaib, Sharif, & Abdullah, 2025a). Furthermore, dependence on shared devices or inconsistent connectivity often leads to fragmented participation, particularly during synchronous learning sessions (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a). Such conditions reinforce existing hierarchies within higher education (Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026b), where digitally privileged students gain cumulative advantages over time (Shoaib, Iqbal, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026b). Consequently, unequal digital infrastructure operates as a key mechanism through which educational inequality is reproduced (Ali, Abdullah, & Shoaib, 2026), underscoring for targeted policy interventions to ensure equitable access and inclusive digital transformation (Ali, Abdullah, & Shoaib, 2026b).

Theme 2: Gendered Digital Access and Control

Gendered patterns of access to and control over digital technologies in Pakistan are deeply embedded in patriarchal social structures and cultural norms (Ahmed, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026b). Female students often experience restricted ownership and use of digital devices (Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026c), with access mediated by family authority,

particularly in conservative and rural settings (Shoaib, Waris, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025b). Unlike their male counterparts, who typically enjoy greater autonomy in using smartphones (Ahmed, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026), laptops, and internet services, many female students rely on shared devices or require permission to go online (Ahmed, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026a). Concerns around safety, honor, and surveillance further regulate women's digital presence (Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026a), limiting their participation in online classes, academic discussions, and virtual collaboration (Shoaib, Waris, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025a). As a result, digital access is not simply a matter of availability but is shaped by power relations that determine to use technology, when, and for what purposes (Waris, Shoaib, Sharif, & Abdullah, 2025b).

These gendered constraints significantly affect educational engagement and outcomes in higher education (Shoaib, Waris, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). Limited control over digital resources reduces female students' ability to fully participate in synchronous learning (Waris, Shoaib, Sharif, & Abdullah, 2025c), access academic materials, and develop digital competencies essential for academic and professional advancement (Waris, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). Moreover, the monitoring of online activities and the fear of social scrutiny often discourage active participation (Shoaib & Abdullah, 2025), reinforcing patterns of invisibility and marginalization in digital classrooms (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b). This unequal distribution of digital autonomy not only reproduces gender disparities in education but also constrains the transformative potential of digital learning (Ali, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a). The studies found that addressing these challenges requires gender-sensitive policies and interventions that go beyond infrastructure provision to tackle the socio-cultural dynamics governing digital access and control in Pakistan (Ali, Shoaib, & Ali, 2025; Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025c).

Theme 3: Digital Literacy and Skill Gaps

Digital literacy and skill gaps constitute a critical dimension of the digital divide in Pakistani higher education, extending beyond mere access to technology (Ali, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b; Iqbal, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). Students enter universities with highly uneven levels of exposure to digital tools, shaped by differences in schooling backgrounds (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b, 2025c), medium of instruction, and prior opportunities for technological engagement (Ali, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a, 2025b). Those from urban, private, or elite educational institutions are generally more proficient in navigating learning management systems, academic databases (Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025a, 2025b), and collaborative platforms, whereas students from rural or under-resourced public schools often struggle with basic digital operations (Shoaib, Rasool, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b; Shoaib, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). These disparities are further intensified by limited institutional support for digital skill development (Shoaib, Iqbal, Rasool, & Abdullah, 2025), leaving many students to acquire competencies through informal and uneven learning processes (Shoaib, Rasool, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a).

From a gendered perspective, digital literacy gaps are closely linked to patterns of socialization and differential access to technological experiences (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025c; Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). Female students, particularly from conservative or low-income backgrounds, have had fewer opportunities to develop hands-on digital skills due to restricted access and societal expectations (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025a, 2025b). This not only affects their confidence in using digital platforms but also limits their academic participation (Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025c), critical engagement, and ability to benefit from online learning resources (Shoaib, Batool, Kausar, & Abdullah, 2025). Consequently, digital skill inequalities translate into broader academic disadvantages, reinforcing existing hierarchies within higher education (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Iqbal, 2025; Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah,

2025). These gaps entail systematic integration of digital literacy training within university curricula (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Usmani, 2025b; Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Ahmed, 2025), alongside targeted interventions that empower marginalized and female students to build confidence and competence in digitally mediated learning environments (Ahmed, Shoaib, & Zaman, 2025; Shoaib, Ahmed, & Usmani, 2025a).

Theme 4: Socio-Cultural Norms and Mobility Constraints

Socio-cultural norms in Pakistan play a decisive role in shaping students' engagement with digital education, particularly by regulating mobility and access to learning spaces (Shoaib, Ahmed, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a). In many contexts, especially in rural and conservative settings, mobility restrictions disproportionately affect female students (Shoaib, Kausar, Ali, & Abdullah, 2025), limiting their ability to access public or institutional digital resources such as university labs, libraries, or internet cafes (Shoaib, Rasool, Kalsoom, & Ali, 2025). Even after digital infrastructure exists, cultural expectations surrounding gender roles (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a), safety, and family honor often confine women to domestic spaces where access to reliable internet or private study environments have been inadequate (Ali, Shoaib, & Kausar, 2025). These constraints highlight that digital exclusion is not solely a technological issue but is deeply intertwined with social norms that govern spatial movement and educational participation (Shoaib, Ali, & Kausar, 2025; Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025c).

Such mobility limitations have direct implications for academic engagement and continuity in higher education (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b; Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b). Female students have face difficulties attending synchronous online classes, participating in group work (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a), or accessing supplementary learning materials, particularly as soon as these require physical presence in resource-rich environments (Shoaib & Bashir, 2025; Shoaib, Shamsheer, & Iqbal, 2025).

Additionally, domestic responsibilities and expectations of caregiving further restrict the time and autonomy available for academic pursuits (Shoaib, 2025b; Shoaib & Kausar, 2025). These intersecting constraints reinforce patterns of educational inequality by limiting both the quantity and quality of learning experiences available to female students (Shoaib, 2025a; Shoaib, Tariq, & Iqbal, 2025b). Therefore, digital inequality in Pakistan requires a broader sociological lens that considers how mobility, gender norms (Shoaib, Iqbal, & Iftikhar, 2025; Shoaib, Tariq, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025), and spatial access collectively shape students' ability to benefit from digital transformation in higher education (Shoaib, Shamsheer, & Iqbal, 2025; Shoaib, Tariq, & Iqbal, 2025a).

Theme 5: Institutional Preparedness and Pedagogical Inequalities

Institutional preparedness in Pakistani higher education varies significantly, shaping unequal capacities to deliver effective and inclusive digital learning (Shoaib, 2024d; Shoaib & Zaman, 2025). Universities differ in terms of technological infrastructure, availability of learning management systems, faculty training, and administrative support for online education (Ali, Shoaib, & Abdullah, 2022; Shoaib & Ullah, 2021a). Well-resourced private institutions are generally better equipped to transition to digital and blended pedagogies (Ali, Zaman, & Shoaib, 2024; Shoaib, Zaman, & Abbas, 2024), offering structured platforms, technical assistance, and interactive teaching tools (Shoaib, Ali, & Abbas, 2024; Shoaib, Rasool, & Anwar, 2021). In contrast, many public sector universities face infrastructural deficits, limited bandwidth (Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2023, 2024b), and insufficient training for faculty, resulting in fragmented and less effective online teaching practices (Shoaib, 2023c; Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2024a). These disparities create uneven academic environments where students' learning experiences are contingent upon the institutional context in which they are enrolled (Shoaib, 2024c; Shoaib, Naseer, & Naseer, 2023).

Pedagogical inequalities further emerge from variations in teaching approaches, assessment methods, and levels of digital integration across institutions and disciplines (Shoaib, 2024a, 2024b). Faculty members often adopt lecture-centric online methods due to limited training in digital pedagogy that reduce student engagement and participation (Shoaib, 2023a, 2023b). Moreover, a lack of inclusive teaching strategies tends to disadvantage students with limited digital access or lower technological proficiency (Shoaib, Usmani, & Abdullah, 2023; Shoaib, Usmani, & Ali, 2022), disproportionately affecting those from marginalized and gender-constrained backgrounds (Shoaib, Mustafa, & Hussain, 2022, 2023). The absence of standardized guidelines and support mechanisms exacerbates these inequalities, reinforcing stratification within the higher education system (Shoaib, Anwar, & Rasool, 2022; Shoaib, Rasool, Anwar, & Ali, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive institutional reforms, including investment in digital infrastructure (Shoaib, Ali, Anwar, & Abdullah, 2022; Shoaib, Anwar, & Mustafa, 2022), capacity-building for faculty, and the development of inclusive (Shoaib, Mehmood, & Butt, 2022; Ullah, Shoaib, Ali, & Ullah, 2022), student-centered pedagogies that accommodate diverse learning in digitally mediated environments (Shoaib, Fatima, & Jamil, 2021; Shoaib, Tariq, Shahzadi, & Ali, 2022).

Theme 6: Participation, Engagement, and Classroom Interaction

Digital transformation in Pakistani higher education has significantly reshaped patterns of student participation and classroom interaction, revealing both opportunities and constraints (Shoaib, 2021; Shoaib, Ali, & Akbar, 2021). Online and blended learning platforms alter traditional dynamics, with students' engagement often mediated by access to devices, internet stability, and digital competencies (Ali, Shoaib, & Abdullah, 2021; Shoaib, Iqbal, & Tahira, 2021). Those with reliable digital access and confidence in using online tools participate actively in discussions, collaborative projects, and interactive assessments, whereas students facing

infrastructural or skill gaps have remained passive observers (Ahmad, Ahmad, Shoaib, & Shaukat, 2021; Ahmad, Shoaib, & Shaukat, 2021). This uneven participation reinforces pre-existing academic hierarchies, as students with higher digital capital are more visible (Ahmad, Ahmad, & Shoaib, 2016; Anwar, Shoaib, & Javed, 2013), receive more feedback, and are better positioned to succeed in digitally mediated learning environments (Shoaib, Ahmad, Ali, & Abdullah, 2021; Shoaib, Ali, Anwar, Rasool, et al., 2021).

Gendered factors further influence engagement and interaction within digital classrooms (Shoaib, Ali, Anwar, & Shaukat, 2021; Shoaib, Ali, & Naseer, 2021). Female students, particularly in conservative contexts, have experienced limited opportunities to speak up, join virtual forums, or contribute to group activities due to social norms, self-censorship (Shoaib, Abdullah, & Ali, 2020), or restricted access to private study spaces (Shoaib, Abdullah, & Ali, 2021). These constraints reduce their visibility and academic voice (Shoaib & Rafique, 2015), undermining confidence and participation in collaborative learning (Rafique & Shoaib, 2015). Even as soon as platforms are accessible, cultural and gendered expectations shape how students interact (Shoaib, Shaukat, Khan, & Saeed, 2013), respond, and engage with peers and instructors (Shoaib, Latif, & Usmani, 2013). Consequently, classroom interaction in digital spaces is not neutral but socially structured, reflecting broader inequalities in access, agency, and opportunity (Shoaib & Ullah, 2021b). Effective interventions require pedagogical strategies that actively promote equitable participation (Shoaib, Saeed, & Cheema, 2012), foster inclusive engagement, and the social and technological barriers that hinder meaningful student involvement (Anwar, Shoaib, & Shahid, 2024; Anwar, Shoaib, Zaman, & Arshad, 2024).

Theme 7: Intersectionality and Compounded Disadvantages

The concept of intersectionality is crucial for understanding how multiple social identities such as gender, socio-economic status (Abdullah, Usmani, & Shoaib, 2023a, 2023b), geographic location, and institutional affiliation interact to

produce compounded educational disadvantages in Pakistani higher education (Mariam, Anwar, & Shoaib, 2022; Naseer, Shoaib, & Naseer, 2022). Female students from rural or low-income backgrounds, for example, often face simultaneous barriers (Anwar, Shoaib, & Mustafa, 2022; A. Naseer, Shoaib, Ali, & Bilal, 2021; Shoaib & Abdullah, 2021): limited access to digital infrastructure, restricted mobility due to socio-cultural norms, and minimal institutional support (S Mariam, Anwar, Shoaib, & Rasool, 2021; Naseer, Shoaib, Ali, & Ahmad, 2021). These intersecting factors do not operate independently but reinforce one another, creating layered forms of exclusion that amplify the effects of the digital divide (Ali, Shoaib, & Syed, 2021; Anwar, Shoaib, & Zahra, 2021). As a result, certain groups of students' experience heightened vulnerability in digitally mediated learning environments, struggling to participate fully or achieve equitable academic outcomes (Ahmad, Shoaib, & Abdullah, 2021; Ali, Shoaib, & Asad, 2021).

Intersectional analysis also highlights the uneven distribution of opportunities and resources within universities, showing how privilege and disadvantage coexist in complex ways (Abdullah & Shoaib, 2021; Shoaib & Abdullah, 2020). Urban, male, and financially better-off students are more likely to benefit from both technological access and institutional support, whereas marginalized students face overlapping constraints that inhibit academic engagement (Shoaib, Khan, & Shaukat, 2012; Shoaib, Munir, Masood, Ali, & Sher, 2012). Gendered digital inequities intersect with class and location to shape not only access but also confidence, agency, and long-term educational trajectories (Shoaib, Iqbal, Baneen, et al., 2026b; Shoaib, Shamraiz, Abdullah, et al., 2026a). Recognizing these compounded disadvantages is essential for designing policies and interventions that do not treat inequalities in isolation (Shoaib, 2025a, 2025b) but address the structural interplay of social, cultural, and technological factors that reproduce educational exclusion in Pakistan (Ali, Shoaib, et al., 2025a; Shoaib, 2024d).

Theme 8: Digital Divide and the Reproduction/Transformation of Educational Inequality

The digital divide in Pakistani higher education functions as both a mechanism of reproducing existing inequalities and a potential catalyst for transformative change (Shoaib, 2023a, 2023b). On one hand, disparities in access to digital devices, internet connectivity (Shoaib, 2024b), and digital skills often reinforce socio-economic, gendered (Shoaib, 2024a), and geographic hierarchies, ensuring that students with greater resources continue to accumulate advantages in learning outcomes, academic visibility, and future opportunities (Shoaib, 2024c). Digital education, once implemented without equitable infrastructure and support (Shoaib, 2023a, 2024b), thus perpetuate traditional patterns of exclusion, privileging urban, male, and affluent students whereas marginalizing those already disadvantaged (Shoaib, 2024d; Shoaib, Rasool, et al., 2023).

On the other hand, the digital transformation of education also holds the potential to disrupt conventional inequalities, inclusive policies, gender-sensitive interventions (Shoaib, 2025a; Shoaib, Ahmed, & Iqbal, 2025), and institutional support systems are effectively applied (Shoaib & Bashir, 2025; Shoaib, Kausar, et al., 2025). Digital platforms offer flexible learning opportunities, access to global knowledge resources, and alternative pedagogical approaches that empower marginalized students (Shoaib, 2025a; Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, et al., 2025), particularly women, to overcome socio-cultural and spatial constraints (Shoaib, 2025b; Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, et al., 2025c). The extent to which digitalization either reproduces or transforms educational inequality in Pakistan depends on the interplay between structural access, institutional preparedness, and social interventions (Shoaib, 2024c, 2024d).

Theoretical Insights

Bourdieu's framework of social, cultural, and economic capital provides a foundational lens to understand how digital inequalities reproduce educational hierarchies. Access to digital infrastructure and literacy has been viewed as

forms of cultural capital, unevenly distributed according to students' socio-economic backgrounds. Those possessing greater digital resources and skills accumulate academic advantages, reinforcing existing patterns of educational inequality (Bourdieu, 1986). Gendered restrictions on technology access further demonstrate how cultural capital is differentially allocated, privileging male students over female students in digital learning spaces. The digital divide theory emphasizes disparities in access, skills, and effective use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) as determinants of educational inequality (Van Dijk, 2005). In Pakistan, this framework highlights not only the urban-rural and socio-economic gaps in technology access but also the gendered dimension, where cultural norms and familial controls limit female students' participation in online education. The theory underscores that digital inequalities are socially constructed and intertwined with broader structural inequities.

Feminist perspectives, particularly those addressing gendered power relations in education, illuminate how socio-cultural norms and patriarchal structures restrict female students' access to digital tools and learning opportunities (Connell, 2009). These constraints are evident in mobility restrictions, limited autonomy over devices, and social surveillance, which reduce participation and reinforce gendered educational disadvantage. Feminist theory helps explain the mechanisms through which digital technology both empower and constrain women in higher education. Intersectionality theory offers insight into how overlapping social identities gender, class, geography, and institutional affiliation compound disadvantage in digital learning (Crenshaw, 1991). Female students from rural or low-income backgrounds face multiple, mutually reinforcing barriers, including infrastructural scarcity, restricted mobility, and low digital literacy, which collectively exacerbate educational inequality. This lens allows researchers to move beyond single-axis analyses of digital exclusion and understand the layered complexity of disadvantage.

Sen's capability approach emphasizes individuals' real freedoms to achieve desired educational outcomes, highlighting how inequalities in digital access and literacy constrain students' substantive opportunities to learn and participate (Sen, 1999). In the Pakistani context, unequal digital infrastructure, gendered access, and socio-cultural restrictions limit students' capabilities to fully engage in higher education, reflecting the need for interventions that expand both access and agency. Social constructivist theory underscores that learning is socially mediated and context-dependent, implying that digital technologies alone have not guarantee equitable educational outcomes (Vygotsky, 1978). Gendered patterns of access, institutional support, and cultural norms shape how students interact with digital learning environments, influencing collaboration, knowledge construction, and engagement.

Conclusion

This study has examined the digital divide in Pakistani higher education functions as both a reflection and a driver of educational inequality, with gender emerging as a critical axis shaping access, participation, and outcomes. Disparities in digital infrastructure, including access to devices, internet connectivity, and electricity, reproduce socio-economic and geographic hierarchies, privileging urban, affluent, and male students whereas marginalizing those from rural or low-income backgrounds. Gendered social norms and mobility restrictions further constrain female students' engagement, limiting their control over digital tools and opportunities for active participation. Digital literacy gaps and uneven institutional preparedness exacerbate these inequalities, reinforcing traditional hierarchies even in technologically mediated learning environments. At the same time, the study identifies the transformative potential of digital education after coupled with inclusive policies, gender-sensitive interventions, and robust institutional support. Digital platforms expand learning opportunities, enhance flexibility, and provide alternative pathways for marginalized students, particularly women, to engage meaningfully with knowledge and academic

processes. The interplay of intersectional factors gender, class, geography, and institutional type underscores the complexity of educational disadvantage, demonstrating that addressing the digital divide requires comprehensive strategies that combine technological provision, pedagogical innovation, and socio-cultural awareness. Ultimately, mitigating digital inequality is essential for fostering equitable, inclusive, and transformative higher education in Pakistan.

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