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Jagged Integration: A Thematic Analysis of Media and Information Literacy in Digital Pakistan Policy 2018

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ABSTRACT

National digital policies are mostly regarded as blueprints for civic omission and governance ambition. Media and Information Literacy (MIL), as defined by UNESCO in 2013, is a set of five closely related competencies, Access, Analysis, Evaluation, Creation, and Action, most commonly agreed upon as fundamental in the strengthening of democratic resilience and increasing civic participation. (Buckingham, 2019; Frau-Meigs et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2011). No prior study has undertaken a systematic evaluation dimension by dimension of the main national digital governance framework of Pakistan, i.e., the Digital Pakistan Policy 2018, vis-a-vis the UNESCO Media and Information Literacy (MIL) Framework. This study attempts to fill this gap through deductive qualitative thematic analysis of the entire policy document (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Schreier, 2012). The study uses Potter's media literacy continuum (2014) and Hobbs's civic media literacy framework (2010) as interpretive lenses. The study reveals a phenomenon, "jagged integration," which embodies the selective incorporation of provisions related to media and information literacy (MIL) that strengthens a techno-economic governance agenda lacking the critical, evaluative, and civic dimensions of MIL that UNESCO deems central. (UNESCO, 2013, 2020). Evidence-based policy recommendations that align with Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 16 are proposed.

Keywords: *Media and Information Literacy; Digital Pakistan Policy 2018; UNESCO MIL Framework; digital governance; misinformation; digital citizenship; policy analysis; Jagged integration*

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary society is characterized as fundamentally networked, a characterization only amplified by subsequent decades (Castells, 2010). Data flows through peer-to-peer networks at an unmatched rate; it is user-generated, algorithmically curated, and largely unverifiable without intentional critical engagement (Van Dijck, 2013; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Navigating this environment requires more than just connections. It is important to learn that how to distinguish between good and bad sources, comprehend the role of platform architecture in interaction of information and be a responsible digital agent, rather than a reactive user (Hobbs, 2010; Livingstone and Helsper, 2007; Potter, 2014). This is what constitutes Media and Information Literacy (MIL), as implemented by the Global MIL Assessment Framework (2013) of UNESCO, which encompasses five dimensions interrelated to each other: Access, Analysis, Evaluation, Creation and Action. The following dimensions have become the default benchmarks, by which MIL policies are evaluated regarding the digital governance, education, and media on the national level (Frau-Meigs et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2020; Wilson et al., 2011).

Digital Pakistan Policy 2018 is the main focus of analysis since it has not been adequately covered in previous scholarship (Ali et al., 2023; Jamil, 2021). This policy is the largest national digital governance tool till date in Pakistan. It is a conclusive, cross-sectoral framework that envisages the digital vision of the state (Ministry of IT & Telecom, 2018). Contrary to sectoral policies of education, health, or telecommunications, the 2018 policy has an assertion of a system and is a template of all other tools (Li, 2025; Naveed et al., 2025). The provincial and sectoral instruments are deliberately not included in the set of the instruments under analysis due to the fact that establishing the prescriptions of the main national instrument is a prior necessary task, on the basis of which the secondary frameworks do not create any necessity to assess them. (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Schreier, 2012).

Empirical urgency makes up the second rationale for this research. Medical and political misinformation, polarization via platforms, and gender-based harm be it driven by digitization, are habitually tolerable in the information ecosystem of Pakistan. Such weaknesses are related to the lack of critical literacy development as a policy scholarship, as discussed in academic literature (Ittefaq et al., 2020; Jamil eet al.,2022; Naveed et al., 2025). The national dialogue on the draft MIL strategy in Pakistan convened by UNESCO, which took place in July 2025 in Islamabad, has found the as-yet lack of a digital-literate society, limited access to verified information, and an organizational marginalization of rural and marginalized communities to be structural gaps (UNESCO, 2025). Studies on the policy of media and information literacy (MIL) have consistently revealed that the initial focus of attention is a structural tendency in most instances of governance, especially to the lower-middle-income nations, towards the technical access first and critical literacy thereafter (Frau-Meigs et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2020). An evaluation of the new policy that took effect in 2018 would help understand whether this global trend can be seen in Pakistan and will turn the comparative criticisms of the policies into practical reforms. There is a lack of prior studies that conducted a dimension-by-dimension analysis of the policy under the UNESCO Media and Information Literacy (MIL) Framework carried out with the help of qualitatively transparent methodology (Ali et al., 2023; Li, 2025).

Research Questions

Three research questions guide this study:

- RQ1: To what extent does the Digital Pakistan Policy 2018 integrate the five core dimensions of the UNESCO MIL Framework, Access, Analysis, Evaluation, Creation, and Action, at the level of policy text?
- RQ2: What is the nature of the gap between the 2018 policy's digital skills discourse and the holistic competencies prescribed by global MIL standards, as interpreted through Potter's (2014) literacy continuum and Hobbs's (2010) civic framework?
- RQ3: What evidence-based policy reforms would align Pakistan's national digital strategy with international MIL best practices and the relevant Sustainable Development Goals?

Research Gap and Scholarly Contribution

The techno-economic nature of the digital policy landscape in Pakistan has been reported in the existing body of literature on the topic, including the account of the digital divide by Jamil (2021), the discourse analysis of the Digital Pakistan initiative by Li (2025) and the gendered critique of the issue presented by Naveed et al., (2025). Any of these did not systematically and dimension-by-dimension audited the text of the 2018 policy against a legitimate, operationalized MIL framework. This work has four discrete contributions: (1) it shows that all five dimensions of UNESCO MIL can be used as a structured evaluative

system to analyze national digital policy, and transferred to other, similar governance contexts; (2) it coins the idea of jagged integration to describe the structure of selective, uneven national MIL inclusion which defines techno-economic digital governance; (3) it introduces a provision-level coded, provision-based problem-solving matrix; and (4) it translates comparative MIL critique into a policy-specific advice to the next digital cycle in Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations of Media and Information Literacy

Media literacy scholarship has shifted over four decades from critical-pedagogical analysis of broadcast texts toward a participatory conception of digital competency suited to networked environments (Buckingham, 2003, 2019; Hobbs, 2010; Livingstone, 2004; Potter, 2014), with direct implications for how policy frameworks define digital citizenship. Livingstone and Helsper (2007) demonstrated that digital engagement exists along a continuum of depth and criticality, and that physical access does not produce critical literacy as a natural by-product, a finding consolidated by evidence that the digital divide shifts from access to differences in usage and skill (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014), with direct implications for policies conflating connectivity with inclusion (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Warschauer, 2004).

Potter's continuum model (2014), from surface-level exposure at the low end to autonomous ideological critique at the high, is especially effective for policy analysis. This model works better in placing provisions within a specific level of cognitive and civic demand, a nuance that binary presence/absence assessments can't capture (Frau-Meigs et al., 2017). Hobbs (2010) extends this concept into the civic realm establishing media literacy as a civic and moral activity, such as ethical access to information, critical analysis, responsible content production, and democracy. This opinion is in direct opposition to policy frameworks which imply digital skills as a professional skill set (Mihailidis, 2014). This set of views is combined by UNESCO in its Global Media and Information Literacy (MIL) Assessment Framework (2013) in five working dimensions, which can be regarded as normative guidelines in the assessment of policies on the state level. MIL is a competency associated with a right and a freedom to communicate and participate in democracy and fair management of information (UNESCO, 2013; Wilson et al., 2011; Grizzle et al., 2021).

Digital Governance and Media Literacy Policy in Pakistan

Digital policy trends in Pakistan have prioritized techno-economic goals above all others - and expansion of infrastructure, software exports and e-governance - to the detriment of developing capability in the digital domain (Ali et al., 2023; Ministry of Science & Technology, 2007). The Digital Pakistan Policy 2018 does this with considerable detail, placing information and communication technology (ICT) as a driver for economic growth and the digitization of government operations. However, it makes only limited explicit references to the core information competencies citizens need (Jamil, 2021; Li, 2025; Ministry of IT & Telecom, 2018). Jamil (2021) demonstrates that access expansion has not translated into meaningful digital participation due to the urban–rural divide, gender disparity, and income and education inequalities, contextual factors policy has failed to address. Li (2025) shows through discourse analysis that media narratives of the Digital Pakistan initiative shifted from early optimism to concerns over the digital divide, governance tensions, and civil liberties, contesting the very techno-economic architecture examined here. Naveed et al., (2025), applying the capabilities approach (Nussbaum, 2011) and decolonial feminist lenses (Lugones, 2010), demonstrate that digital inclusion narratives treat platforms as a universal remedy for gender inequality, an access-first logic marginalizing the critical literacy and civic agency dimensions of women's digital participation.

Digital Policy Design and South Asian Comparative Context

Policy design theory holds that instruments are never neutral, they encode governance rationalities and privilege certain problem framings over others (Howlett, 2019; Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007). Applied here, this lens reveals the 2018 policy's techno-economic orientation as reflecting a coherent governance logic, ICT as economic lever rather than civic infrastructure, making the policy purposively selective rather than incidentally deficient. The analytical task is to document precisely what that selectivity excludes, and at what civic cost. Regionally, India's National Digital Communications Policy 2018 and Bangladesh's Digital Bangladesh Strategy both treat critical digital literacy as a downstream consequence of access expansion rather than a primary objective (Bhatt & MacKenzie, 2019; Islam, 2021); Malaysia, despite more advanced MIL curriculum integration, similarly subordinates evaluation and civic-action competencies in its digital governance instruments (UNESCO, 2020). Pakistan's 2018 policy is more marked by regional representativeness than a particular national flaw. This result backs the claim that the noted gap shows a structural bias in digital governance, not an isolated case of national oversight.

Global Comparative Perspectives on MIL Policy Integration

Comparative scholarship suggests that, in many different national contexts, technical access is given higher priority than critical literacy. (Frau-Meigs et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2020). The 2020 UNESCO study in five Asian countries showed that there are fragmented strategies, no consensus among stakeholders on what media and information literacy (MIL) means, and inadequate teacher preparation even in places with formal digital agendas. A parallel tendency is also documented in European contexts, where digital literacy is subordinated to digital economy objectives even in the high-income environments (Frau-Meigs et al., 2017). Taken together, these factors suggest a continued practice of selective integration, marked by the adoption of MIL components that place priority on economic competitiveness while consistently sidelining the civic, ethical, and evaluative dimensions laid out in the UNESCO framework. Such a context would thus place the policy of Pakistan in 2018 not as a national failure in isolation but as a specific national articulation of a larger structural tendency in digital governance at the global level (UNESCO, 2020; Grizzle et al., 2021). According to the national dialogue convened by UNESCO on draft Media and Information literacy (MIL) strategy of Pakistan, it became clear that some extremely vital competencies of the 2018 draft are not addressed. The most important of these was to enable more fact-checking, and to encourage informed civic engagement. This means that, as it is, the policy fails to respond to the most urgent needs of the citizens (UNESCO, 2025; Ittefaq et al., 2020). Scholarly discourse regarding whether this gap signifies structural inevitability (Frau-Meigs et al., 2017) or deliberate choice, a refusal to treat the citizens as critical agents (Buckingham, 2019), is not resolved here; The study provides the necessary textual evidence required for any causal or normative argument.

Media Literacy as Democratic Infrastructure: The Misinformation Nexus

A substantial and increasing body of research empirically establishes the relationship between media and information literacy (MIL) competencies and citizen resilience to misinformation (Guess et al., 2020; Jeong et al., 2012; Jones-Jang et al., 2021). Crucially, Jones-Jang, Mortensen and Liu (2021) demonstrate that among the various literacies such as media, news, digital, and information literacies, only one literacy, information literacy, or the capacity to locate and verify information, can be said to significantly predict the proper identification of fake news. Brief evaluation-focused interventions produce measurable discernment improvements even in the lower-middle-income contexts (Guess et al., 2020). The meta-analysis by Jeong et al., (2012) validates the superiority of the consistently positive effects on knowledge, criticism, and the behavioral outcomes. The disseminations of medical misinformation on social media in Pakistan during the COVID-19 pandemic not only highlighted the actual civic and societal health threats but also spanned through information landscapes that lack strong evaluation capabilities (Ittefaq et al., 2020). The special

MIL courses and developed staff are structurally scarce (Jamil et al., 2022). Among the undergraduates that have large disparities in disciplines, Irfan, Rafiq and Arif (2024) record that the information competency that is self-rated is slightly above average. Khan, Ikram and Saleem (2023) reveal that the digital inequalities are converted to the quantifiable cybersecurity vulnerability, which cumulatively determines that the policy excessive neglect of the capacity to evaluate citizens has documented civic impacts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework rests on three complementary theoretical pillars that work together as overlapping lenses for interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Schreier, 2012). Potter (2014) calibrates the cognitive dimension, at what level of critical demand does the policy operate? Hobbs (2010) supplies the civic dimension, does the policy develop citizens as democratic agents? UNESCO (2013) provides the operational taxonomy, which specific competencies are present or absent? The integration of all three frameworks would be more helpful analytically than using any of them alone (Frau-Meigs et al., 2017; Grizzle et al., 2021).

Potter's Media Literacy Continuum

Potter's continuum, as he laid it out in 2014, goes from basic awareness at the lower end to structural analysis in the middle levels and on to autonomous ideological critique and reflexive production at the top. This framework pinpoints the cognitive demand embedded in each policy provision very sharply. For instance, it distinguishes between a provision that creates internet connectivity, located at the lowest tier, and one that trains citizens to assess the credibility of information sources, located at the upper tier. A policy which is mainly confined to the lowest tier does not meet Potter's definition of an MIL-integrated framework, irrespective of the terminology related to literacy that it may use (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014).

Hobbs's Civic Media Literacy Framework

Hobbs (2010) sees media literacy as a fundamentally civic practice that enables ethical access to information, critical analysis, responsible content creation, and democratic engagement. In this context, the framework assesses whether the Creation and Action provisions of the 2018 policy conceptualize these dimensions as economic activities or as expressions of democratic voice, participatory citizenship, and ethical digital agency. This evaluative inquiry is one that Potter's continuum alone is insufficient to address (Hobbs, 2010; Mihailidis, 2014; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

UNESCO MIL Framework as Analytical Schema

The UNESCO (2013) framework acts as a standard reference and tool for classification. The framework should not be seen in this dual role as a weakness of methodology; rather, it is the very logic of normative policy analysis, where the criteria for evaluation and the perspective of analysis spring from a single framework validated internationally. Legitimacy of UNESCO as a normative benchmark rests on three key grounds: extensive adoption across different national policy contexts (Frau-Meigs et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2020); explicit rights-based grounding in the freedom of expression and the democratic participation (Wilson et al., 2011); and its status as reference framework that is formally invoked in Pakistan's own national MIL dialogue (UNESCO, 2025). Applying it as a coding schema to a policy from the same national context is therefore the most contextually defensible analytical choice available.

The five UNESCO (2013) dimensions constitute the primary thematic categories, operationalized for coding in Table 1 per Wilson et al., (2011) and UNESCO (2013). An additional Techno-Economic Framing

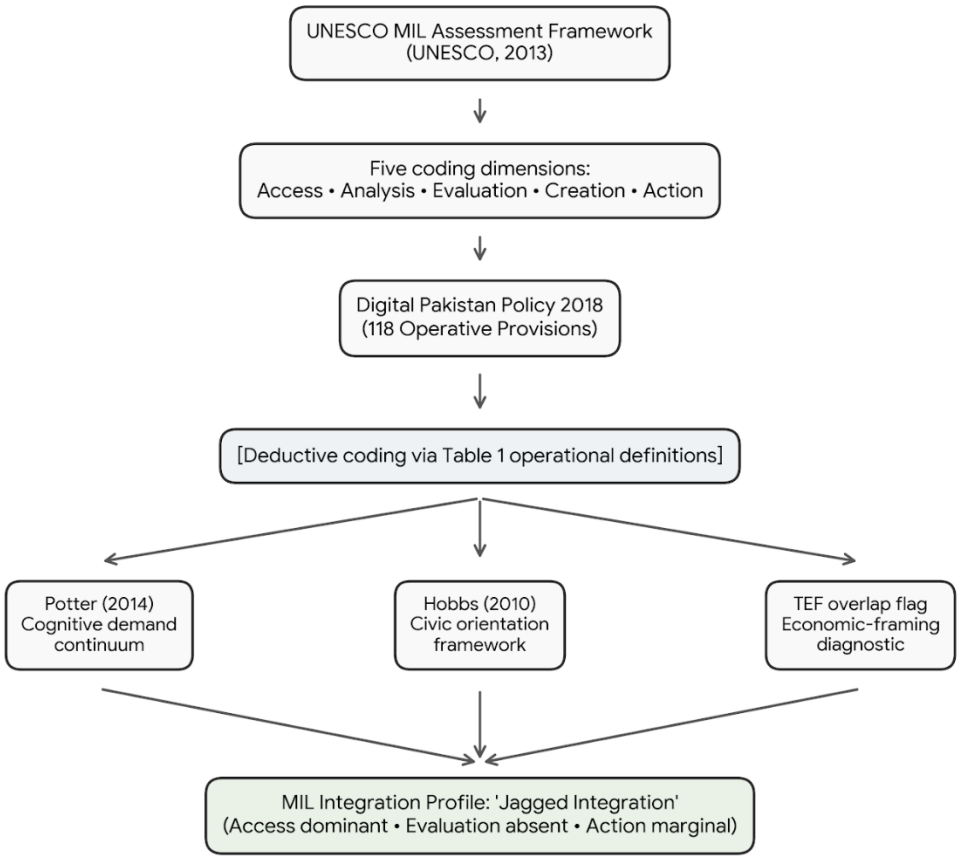
(TEF) overlap code was developed inductively, consistent with methodological provision for inductive sub-coding within deductive frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Schreier, 2012), to capture provisions in any primary dimension framing digital skills predominantly through economic productivity, market competitiveness, or workforce development to the exclusion of civic or democratic dimensions (Frau-Meigs et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2020). A provision already assigned a citizen-competency primary code was flagged TEF = 1 when its dominant lexical register foregrounded economic growth, market competitiveness, employability, entrepreneurship, or export value, evidenced by a verbatim anchor such as 'market intensive skills' or 'mass adoption and commercialization', and TEF = 0 otherwise. The TEF flag is distinct from the NR (No citizen-competency Relevance) code, which marks provisions carrying no citizen-competency content at all (e.g., industry incentives, hardware manufacturing, institutional machinery). The full TEF inventory is reported in Table 6.

Table 1. Operational definitions of the analytical codes

Code	Operational definition (coding rule)	Analytical anchor
Access	Provisions enabling citizens' physical, material or skills-based entry to ICT, connectivity, devices or digital services (broadband, telecentres, affordability, inclusion of marginalized groups).	Lowest tiers of Potter's (2014) continuum unless paired with critical competencies
Analysis	Provisions developing the capacity to understand, deconstruct or technically operate media, information or digital systems (curricula, skills training, analytical capabilities).	Mid-continuum; civic value contingent on framing (Potter, 2014)
Evaluation	Provisions developing citizens' capacity to assess the credibility, accuracy, bias or reliability of information, sources or platforms (source assessment, verification, fact-checking).	Upper continuum; the competency most predictive of misinformation identification (Jones-Jang et al., 2021)
Creation	Provisions enabling citizens to produce digital content, software or media (content development, coding, authoring).	Civic value contingent on expressive versus commercial framing (Hobbs, 2010)
Action	Provisions enabling the use of digital competencies for civic participation, advocacy, rights claims or democratic engagement.	Hobbs's (2010) civic apex
Techno-Economic Framing (TEF; overlap code)	Provisions in any primary dimension framed predominantly through economic productivity, market competitiveness, employability or export value.	Diagnostic of selective integration (cf. UNESCO, 2020)

Note. Sources for dimension definitions: UNESCO (2013); Wilson et al., (2011). The TEF code is applied alongside, not instead of, a primary dimension code. Provisions with no citizen-competency content are coded NR (no citizen-competency relevance). The TEF flag was applied to 14 provisions (11.9% of the corpus); the full inventory is reported in Section 5.6.

Figure 1. Analytical framework: Integration of the three interpretive lenses



Note. The three lenses are applied at the same time. Potter (2014) sets up the cognitive-demand level, Hobbs (2010) deals with civic orientation, and UNESCO (2013) gives the operational coding taxonomy.

Potter's continuum would place each policy provision in terms of the level of cognitive demand while Hobbs's civic framework would assess the contribution of each to democratic citizenship. The taxonomy of UNESCO would indicate which of the five competency dimensions is addressed. All three, collectively, make for an evaluation nuanced, graduated, and civically oriented, a prerequisite in fact for finding that can be both analytically rigorous and actionably relevant in policy contexts (Grizzle et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2011).

METHODOLOGY

This study applies a qualitative deductive thematic analysis approach and does not include hypothesis testing. The research questions set in Section 1.1 guide the analysis, while the analytical framework detailed in Section 3 structures the coding process. The findings are stated as interpretive claims that rely on theoretical concepts.

Research Design

This study employs a deductive qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Schreier, 2012) of the Digital Pakistan Policy 2018. Deductive thematic analysis begins with an established theoretical framework

as the basis for a priori theme identification, methodologically appropriate when, as here, a validated normative framework exists and the research question concerns the presence, absence, and quality of theoretically specified themes in a bounded textual corpus (Schreier, 2012; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Qualitative over purely quantitative content analysis was chosen because it permits assessment not only of theme presence or absence but of framing, depth, and ideological orientation, dimensions frequency counts systematically flatten (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79; Krippendorff, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017).

Two quantitative layers complement the qualitative coding. First, case-insensitive term-frequency counts across the complete policy text (Table 3) make every lexical claim reproducible through a standard text search. Second, all 118 operative provisions were coded and their distribution reported as frequencies and percentages (Table 4). Since the corpus is a complete enumeration and not a probability sample, inferential significance testing is not applied; rather, the focus of analysis rests on matters of qualitative interpretation of framing, depth, and structural positioning (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Krippendorff, 2019). The analysis was conducted manually without CAQDAS, consistent with the provision-by-provision close reading a compact deductive codebook TA demands; the full coding matrix serves as the equivalent audit trail.

Data Source and Analytical Corpus

The primary data source is the complete verbatim text of the Digital Pakistan Policy 2018, a 24-page document issued by the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication, obtained from the official MoIT online archive (Ministry of IT & Telecom, 2018). It is selected because it is Pakistan's primary cross-sectoral digital governance framework, therefore, serving as the model on which all other subsidiary digital skills policies can be based. It is also backed by the urgent empirical evidence of documented deficits in media and information literacy within the information ecosystem of Pakistan (Ittefaq et al., 2020; Jamil et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2025).

The unit of analysis is the policy's lowest-level numbered provision: 72 in Section-I (Key Components, provisions 1.1.1–10.6) and 46 in Section-II (sectoral digitization, provisions 11.1–18.8), 118 total. Chapeau clauses, sectional lead-in sentences, the Preamble, Vision Statement, twelve Policy Objectives, and Section-IV (Policy Implementation and Reviews) were treated as framing text and analyzed qualitatively rather than counted as units. Three components were excluded from coding: the fiscal and non-fiscal incentive provisions of Section-III (pp. 17–20), because tax, financing, and registration incentives address structural conditions of industry growth rather than citizen digital competencies; the Annexure-1 roles-and-responsibilities matrix (pp. 21–23), because administrative role assignments contain no MIL-relevant semantic content; and the reference list (p. 24). The corpus construction is summarized in Table 2. The unit inventory is fully reproducible from the policy's own numbering.

Table 2: Construction of the analytical corpus (Digital Pakistan Policy 2018).

Policy component	Pages	Treatment	Rationale
Preamble	p. 4	Framing text (qualitative)	Establishes the policy's discursive register toward citizens, the IT sector and the economy
Policy Vision and Objectives I–XII	pp. 5–7	Framing text (qualitative)	Highest-order normative statements of the policy
Section-I: Key Components, provisions 1.1.1–10.6	pp. 8–13	72 coded units	Core cross-sectoral provisions: legislation, infrastructure, HRD, ICT for Girls, content development, e-governance

Policy component	Pages	Treatment	Rationale
Section-II: Sectoral digitization, provisions 11.1–18.8	pp. 14–17	46 coded units	Citizen-facing sectoral provisions, including ICT Education
Section-IV: Policy Implementation and Reviews	p. 20	Framing text (qualitative)	Governance and review commitments, including the biennial review
Section-III: Fiscal and non-fiscal incentives	pp. 17–20	Excluded	Industry incentive conditions; no citizen-competency content
Annexure-1: Roles and responsibility matrix	pp. 21–23	Excluded	Administrative role assignments only
References	p. 24	Excluded	No original policy propositions

Note. Unitization rule: the lowest-level numbered provisions constitute the units of analysis (1.1.1–1.1.5; 2.1–2.8; 3.1–3.18; 4.1–4.16; 5.1–5.5; 6.1–6.3; 7.1–7.5; 8.1–8.3; 9.1–9.3; 10.1–10.6; 11.1–11.6; 12.1–12.4; 13.1–13.4; 14.1–14.8; 15.1–15.4; 16.1–16.7; 17.1–17.5; 18.1–18.8). Total N = 118.

Thematic Analysis Procedure

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model: Phase 1 (familiarization) involved two complete readings of the policy document with annotation of thematic patterns, dominant discourse registers, and conspicuous absences, including the complete absence of vocabulary associated with source credibility, misinformation, algorithmic awareness, or civic digital advocacy (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 87–88). Phase 2 (generating initial codes) assigned each of the 118 operative provisions a single primary code, one of the five UNESCO dimensions, institutional-register Evaluation, or NR, together with the TEF overlap flag where economic framing dominated. Phase 3 (searching for themes) grouped coded provisions under the five a priori UNESCO dimensions. Phases 4 and 5 (reviewing and defining themes) assessed each dimension's thematic profile against the Potter continuum and Hobbs civic framework. Phase 6, the reporting phase, synthesized the findings into the analytical narrative as expounded in Section 5. An analytic journal was maintained to document the interpretive decisions throughout the phase (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Morrow, 2005). A thorough additional review of the complete policy text was conducted to identify disconfirming evidence; all relevant passages are addressed as negative cases in Section 5 (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017).

Analytical Rigor and Trustworthiness

Rigor is established through the Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria. Credibility is established through detailed description, verbatim textual evidence for all claims, and the coding framework presented clearly (as Table 1), corpus map (Table 2), lexical evidence base (Table 3), provision-level frequencies (Table 4), integrated thematic profile (Table 5), and TEF inventory (Table 6) (Bringer et al., 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transferability is enhanced by the comprehensive contextualization presented in Section 2 and the comparative literature that places the findings within broader global patterns (Frau-Meigs et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2020). Dependability is addressed through the systematic documentation of the six-phase procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Confirmability is examined through a systematic presentation of negative cases throughout Section 5. (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Morrow, 2005).

The study was conducted in consistence with Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) reflexive thematic analysis tradition. The inter-coder reliability was also conducted and coefficients are not reported. The associated question of reliability in deductive codebook TA relates to the clarity of coding instructions, i.e., whether they could be repeatedly utilized by a secondary coder. This is readily done by Table 1. Also, the lexical-

count layer at Table 3 is replicable in a machine and is not dependent on the subjective judgments in the form of coding. The intra-coder consistency was measured through re-coding a randomly selected subsample 15% (n = 18 provisions) after a six-week period, the agreement was 88.9%, thus, satisfactory consistency with such a design. The maturity level coding table in its entirety that comprises the trail of analysis Krippendorff (2019) considers the key rigor quality in qualitative documents analysis.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

It discusses the Digital Pakistan Policy 2018 in regard to each of the five UNESCO MIL dimensions below. In the event that the policy was mainly written as an economic tool, as the evidence on the same provided below tends to suggest it is possible that the silence of the policy on media and information literacy (MIL) may be construed as a deliberate limitation on its focus and not oversight. Yet, there are huge implications of scoping decisions: the policy that refers to the notion of a knowledge society, a digital inclusion, and empowerment and systematically excludes the competencies that endow these terms with meaning creates well connected citizens that lack criticalities. This analysis is based on three types of text evidence namely: thematic density or the number and percentages of operative clauses focused on each theme; lexical evidence such as particular vocabulary and keywords; and structural positioning that examines the position of themes in the structure of the policy, the emphasis placed on the particular theme, and what is conspicuously absent (Fairclough, 2003; Schreier, 2012). Table 4 reports the full distribution of all 118 provisions; Table 3 consolidates the lexical evidence base; Table 5 presents the integrated thematic profile. All verbatim quotations are cited as (Ministry of IT & Telecom, 2018, p. X).

Table 3. Distribution of the 118 operative provisions of the Digital Pakistan Policy 2018 across the analytical categories (frequencies and percentages).

Primary code	f	%	Provisions (exhaustive and auditable)
Access	30	25.4	2.1–2.8; 3.2; 5.1, 5.3, 5.4; 7.1–7.5; 11.1, 11.3; 12.1, 12.3; 13.2; 14.4, 14.6; 15.2; 16.1, 16.4, 16.7; 18.4, 18.5
Analysis	14	11.9	3.1, 3.3, 3.4, 3.6, 3.8; 5.2; 11.4, 11.5; 16.2, 16.3, 16.6; 17.3, 17.5; 18.7
Evaluation, citizen-facing	0	0.0	None
Evaluation, institutional register only	6	5.1	1.1.1; 8.1, 8.2; 10.2; 12.4; 15.1
Creation	7	5.9	3.12, 3.13, 3.18; 6.1, 6.2, 6.3; 16.5
Action	3	2.5	5.5; 10.3; 15.4
No citizen-competency content (NR)	58	49.2	Remaining provisions: software exports (4.1–4.16), institutional and legal machinery, hardware manufacturing, utilities and data-governance infrastructure
Total	118	100.0	

Note. Each provision relates to a single primary code (refer to Table 1). The distribution is described since the 118 provisions are considered complete enumeration and not that of a probability sample; hence no inferential significance tests apply. Of the 54 provisions containing citizen-facing media and information literacy (MIL) content, Access on its own (30) is greater than the combined total of Analysis, Evaluation, Creation, and Action (24), with citizen-facing Evaluation being completely absent. Section 3.4, primarily coded as Analysis, is further considered in Section 5.5 as a borderline case of Action. The inventories of

provisions are comprehensive and can be externally audited according to the policy's own numbering system.

The Access Dimension: Infrastructure as the Horizon of Digital Citizenship

Access constitutes structurally dominant theme of the 2018 policy, accounting for 30 of 118 operative provisions (25.4%) and saturating framing architecture: access is explicitly invoked in Objectives II, III, IV, VII, VIII, and XI and in the Vision Statement. Digital transformation is an economic growth initiative, with ICT infrastructure being its central enabler (Jamil, 2021; Li, 2025), reflected by the Vision Statement of the Ministry of IT & Telecom, which is to become a strategic enabler for an accelerated digitization eco system, to expand the knowledge-based economy and spur socio economic growth (Ministry of IT and Telecom, 2018, p. 5).

The lexical data are clear and can be completely reproduced by use of standard text search (Table 3): the stem infrastructure is used 15 times, access and derivatives 21 times, entrepreneur and derivatives 20 times, market(s) 18 times, Software Technology Park(s) six times, digital divide and telecenter(s) four times, broadband three times, and e-Payment Gateway twice. In opposition to this, there is a misinformation, disinformation, fake news, fact-checking, source assessment, information credibility, media literacy, information literacy, algorithm, bias and filter bubble instances that have 0 occurrence, the term critical is not present in the text at all. The two literacy-similar stems which do exist are limited to non-citizen registers, with credibility used to mean commercial credibility of firms (Ministry of IT & Telecom, 2018, p. 4), evaluate- used four times, in government evaluation of open-source products (Section 8.1), STEM pedagogy (Section 16.3), and policy outcomes monitoring (Section IV, twice), but never in the context of citizens evaluating information. The only verification presented in the document, the governance of verifiable criteria of export remittances (Section-III, p. 19): verification is given to money, not to information. This is an asymmetry in lexicon concerning a connectivity policy, rather than literacy policy (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017; UNESCO, 2020; Potter, 2014).

Objective VIII also objectivizes a conception of digital inclusion by constituting a connection between the unconnected and access to broadband (Ministry of IT & Telecom, 2018, p. 6) as digital inclusion, which Jamil (2021) defines as the ultimate issue of Pakistan and its discourse on digital inclusion, which van deursen and van Dijk (2014) empirically show as the transformation of access versus usage, and which Warschauer (2004) outlines as the fallacy of a structural decrease in digital inclusion policy in the country. According to the continuum by Potter (2014), most of the Access provisions are at the bottom of the list: basic provision and consumption of connectivity, no cognitive requirement to analyze or be a citizen in a critical manner (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007; Potter, 2014).

The negative cases are Sections 5.4 and 3.4. Section 5.4 appeals to active participation of women and girls in the digital society (Ministry of IT & Telecom, 2018, p. 11); Section 3.4 promises the women a more powerful voice in both their local government and community, as well as in the national and international level (Ministry of IT & Telecom, 2018, p. 9) a register which takes Hobbs's (2010) approach to defining media literacy as a democratic practice. Neither becomes operationalized (both of them are aspirational): neither result in tangible competency development terms of civic digital advocacy, internet political involvement, and critical information navigation. Aspirational civic voice out of operational competency infrastructure is not a MIL provision (Hobbs, 2010; Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017).

Table 4. Replicable lexical evidence: term frequencies in the Digital Pakistan Policy 2018.

Term (counting rule)	**n**	**Register and location in the policy**
Connectivity and market register (present and recurrent)		
access*	21	Objectives IV, VIII, XI; Sections 2.5, 7 passim (includes accessible/accessibility)
entrepreneur*	20	Objective V; Sections 3–4 passim
market(s)	18	Sections 3, 4, 14 passim
infrastructure*	15	Preamble (p. 4); Objective I; Sections 2, 14 passim
Software Technology Park(s)	6	Preamble; Objective VIII(i); Sections 2.1–2.3
digital divide	4	Objective VIII; Sections 2.7, 5.1; Annexure-1
telecenter(s)	4	Objective VIII (ii); Section 2.7
broadband	3	Objectives III, VIII; Annexure-1
e-Payment Gateway	2	Section 2.6; Annexure-1
mass adoption	2	Policy Vision (p. 5); Section 3.12
awareness campaign(s)	2	Sections 14.4, 17.3, adoption promotion only, not critical literacy
market intensive; market ready; industry demands; employability; cutting edge; export potential; commercialize*	1 each	Sections 3.1, 3.6, 4.2, 3.12, each anchors a flagship skills or content provision
Literacy-adjacent stems occurring only in restricted, non-citizen registers		
credibility	1	Commercial credibility of firms (Preamble, p. 4)
evaluate*	4	Government procurement (8.1); STEM pedagogy (16.3); monitoring of policy outcomes (Section IV, twice)
assess*	2	Supply–demand market studies (3.7); procurement cost–benefit and security analysis (8.2)
verify*	1	'Verifiable criteria' for cash rewards on export remittances (Section-III, p. 19)
Citizen-facing MIL vocabulary (absent)		
misinformation; disinformation; fake news; fact-check*; source assessment; source verification; information credibility; critical / critical thinking; media literacy; information literacy; algorithm*; bias*; filter bubble; platform accountability	0	No occurrence anywhere in the document

Note. Counts are case-insensitive, whole-word counts over the complete policy text (cover to p. 24); an asterisk marks a stem family (e.g., evaluate = evaluate, evaluation).

The Analysis Dimension: Vocational Skills and the Conflation of Competency

There is 14 of 118 operative provisions (11.9%; Table 4), mostly in the Human Resource Development strategy (Section 3) and ICT Education (Section 16), and scattered provisions in agriculture (Sections 11.4-11.5) and emerging technologies (Sections 17.3, 17.5, 18.7). HRD strategy is promised to train graduates and professionals in skills on market intensive (Section 3.1) and render IT graduates' market ready in cutting edge technologies, clearly stated to be of relevance and value to the IT industry (Ministry of IT & Telecom, 2018, p. 9). This framing creates the guiding role of these abilities as employability and competitiveness in the market rather than important citizenship, which Potter (2014) defines as a category mistake in the media literacy discourse (Buckingham, 2019). All the sections of the vocational development of the skills have no structurally built vocabulary such as source assessment, information credibility, platform logic, filter bubble, and algorithmic awareness, or media critique do not mention it, which proves a conflated vocabulary regarding professional technical skills with media literacy (Buckingham, 2019; Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008).

The biggest positive case, as well as the true negative case as regards the overall critique of the study, is Section 16.3, which promises to develop student ability to construct, hypothesize, explore, experiment, evaluate, foster logical thinking, problem solving, persistence and collaboration via the promotion of next-generation computing and analytic curriculum (Ministry of IT & Telecom, 2018, p. 16). This is mid- to high-level of the continuum by Potter (2014). Its most important weakness is contextual: evaluate is to assess compute challenges in a STEM context, not the assessments of online information and media company bias and the algorithmic curation of media, which Jones-Jang et al., (2021) and Guess et al., (2020) state are the two key evaluative competencies directly involved in misinformation resilience. To convert this provision to an MIL analytical skill instead of a STEM analytical skill, media-specific, information-credibility-oriented curriculum material would be required, which is institutionalized in pathways that are plotted in Jamil et al., (2022) and tested internationally in Jeong et al., (2012).

The Evaluation Dimension: The Most Consequential Absence

Zero citizen-facing Evaluation provisions exist across the 118-provision corpus (0.0%; Table 4). The Evaluation dimension, encompassing capacity to critically assess the credibility, accuracy, bias, and reliability of information, media sources, and digital content, is structurally absent, not merely underrepresented. No provision addresses citizen-facing information credibility assessment, source verification, fact-checking, lateral reading strategies, or any operational skill for evaluating digital content trustworthiness (Guess et al., 2020; Jones-Jang et al., 2021; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The six provisions in which an evaluative or standard-setting register appears, Sections 1.1.1, 8.1, 8.2, 10.2, 12.4, and 15.1 (5.1% of the corpus), concern exclusively institutional capacities: data-protection standards, government evaluation of open-source ICT products, procurement analysis, government data standardization, e-health provider accreditation, and judicial administration automation These processes relate to governance rather than to citizens' media literacy competencies. These are the elements of institutional rather than individual evaluation capacity, as per Potter (2014). In the civic framework of Hobbs (2010), a policy that does not promote the ability of citizens to evaluate independently the credibility of information does not create media-literate citizens, with or without institutional mechanisms for evaluation.

The consequences are empirically documented: brief evaluation-focused interventions measurably improve discernment between mainstream and false news even in lower-middle-income contexts (Guess et al.,, 2020); information literacy is the only literacy type that significantly predicts accurate fake news identification (Jones-Jang et al.,, 2021); medical misinformation circulating through Pakistan's social media ecology during COVID-19 demonstrated the concrete civic and public-health costs of this absence (Ittefaq

et al.,, 2020); and digital inequality translates into measurable cybersecurity vulnerability (Khan et al.,, 2023). The citizen evaluation capacity is not explicitly discussed within the policy, which shows a deliberate governance decision with clear civic implications. (Ittefaq et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2025).

The Creation Dimension: Commercial Capture

Creation is represented in seven provisions (5.9%; Table 4), reflecting genuine commitment to digital content development as an economic strategy (Ministry of IT & Telecom, 2018). The policy promotes local language content creation (Section 6.1), seed-funded localization (Section 3.13), coding education (Section 16.5), and digital skills training for freelancers (Section 3.18). Applied through Hobbs's (2010) civic framework, the critical evaluative question is: creation for what purpose, in whose interests, toward what civic end?

Lexical evidence across Creation-coded provisions is consistent. Next-generation content is to be developed 'for mass adoption and commercialization' (Section 3.12); seed funding targets 'user adoption' (Ministry of IT & Telecom, 2018, p. 10), meaning market adoption; the entrepreneurial ecosystem aims so entrepreneurs can 'successfully compete in global knowledge economies' (Section 3.11); coding education (Section 16.5) is embedded in a strategy aiming to 'ensure relevance of ICT education to the industry needs' (Section 16.2) and align curricula 'to the requirements of the industry' (Section 17.5). The vocabulary of democratic voice, civic expression, ethical production, cultural preservation, or counter-narrative creation is absent from all Creation-coded provisions. This constitutes 'commercial capture': systematic subordination of the civic, ethical, and expressive potentials of digital creation to its economic utility (Hobbs, 2010; Mihailidis, 2014; Potter, 2014). The single most significant negative case, Section 16.5's commitment to integrating coding from elementary school, represents the policy's highest-potential Creation provision: if implemented with the civic and critical framing Hobbs (2010) and Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) advocate, it could ground creation-as-democratic-expression. Its current framing does not realize this potential (Hobbs, 2010; Jamil et al., 2022).

The Action Dimension: Service Consumption as Civic Participation

Only three of the 118 provisions cover Action (2.5%; Table 4), showing that this dimension is not just small but also structurally residual. Section 10.3 digitizes state purchasing transactions, producing an administrative transactor rather than a democratic participant. Section 5.5's legal protection 'to encourage online participation' (Ministry of IT & Telecom, 2018, p. 11) invokes participation without operationalizing it as advocacy, democratic voice, or civic agency (Hobbs, 2010; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017). Section 15.4 supports Online Dispute Resolution for 'low value civil claims', a form of digital civic action, but administrative-legal rather than political-democratic. The most significant missed opportunity is Section 3.4's commitment to giving women 'a stronger voice in their communities and local government, the national and international level' (Ministry of IT & Telecom, 2018, p. 9), coded under Analysis in Table 4 and operationalized through 'customized programs' for 'socio-economic uplift' rather than through digital civic literacy competency development. Civic voice aspiration is thus decoupled from the competency infrastructure that would make it digitally effective (Hobbs, 2010; Mihailidis, 2014; UNESCO, 2013). Action provisions are scattered as incidental inclusions in sections primarily concerned with governance efficiency, legal protection, and justice administration, never assembled as a coherent framework for civic digital empowerment. The result is a policy that produces connected consumers rather than literate citizens (Hobbs, 2010; Ittefaq et al., 2020; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

Jagged Integration: The Structural Pattern

The Digital Pakistan Policy 2018 exhibits 'jagged integration' with respect to the UNESCO MIL Framework (UNESCO, 2013; Wilson et al., 2011). MIL is not simply absent; some provisions do develop citizen competencies. The problem is structural: those that do serve a techno-economic governance agenda (Access, Analysis in vocational form, Creation in commercial form), while the dimensions most directly implicated in critical democratic citizenship are either wholly absent or residual (Evaluation: 0.0%; Action: 2.5%) (Frau-Meigs et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2020; Li, 2025).

The three forms of textual evidence converge consistently. Textual density: Access alone (30 provisions) exceeds Analysis, Evaluation, Creation, and Action combined (24); across the 54 citizen-facing MIL provisions, distribution is steeply concentrated in Access and citizen-facing Evaluation is wholly unrepresented (Table 4). Lexical evidence: economic productivity, market competitiveness, and infrastructure vocabulary dominates prominent sections while critical evaluation, civic engagement, and democratic voice vocabulary is structurally absent, quantified exactly in Table 3. Structural positioning: Access and commercial creation are embedded in the Vision Statement and primary HRD strategy, the highest-priority architectural positions, while Evaluation and Action appear as marginal provisions in subsidiary sections (Fairclough, 2003; Schreier, 2012). The TEF overlap code was triggered in 14 of 118 provisions (11.9%): five within Access (Sections 2.1, 2.3, 3.2, 14.4, 14.6), six within Analysis (Sections 3.1, 3.3, 3.6, 3.8, 16.2, 17.5), and three within Creation (Sections 3.12, 3.13, 3.18), each anchored by verbatim economic phrases such as 'maximum economic impact' (2.1), 'market intensive skills' (3.1), 'mass adoption and commercialization' (3.12), and 'to the requirements of the industry' (17.5). No Evaluation (institutional register) or Action provision carried the TEF flag, confirming that economic framing concentrates in the dimensions the policy does develop while civic and evaluative dimensions are not economically reframed but structurally absent. Table 5 consolidates the integrated profile. This convergence constitutes strong, auditable, and reproducible evidence for 'jagged integration', enriching the critical assessments of Ali et al., (2023), Jamil (2021), and Li (2025) and directly engaging the gaps identified by the UNESCO-convened national MIL dialogue (UNESCO, 2025).

Table 5. Integrated thematic profile of the Digital Pakistan Policy 2018 across the five UNESCO MIL dimensions.

Dimension	Principal provisions (verified)	Dominant register (verbatim lexical anchors)	Potter (2014) continuum position	Hobbs (2010) civic alignment
Access	2.1–2.8; 3.2; 5.1, 5.3–5.4; 7.1–7.5; 11.1, 11.3; 12.1, 12.3; 13.2; 14.4, 14.6; 15.2; 16.1, 16.4, 16.7; 18.4–18.5 (Objectives II–IV, VII, VIII, XI as framing)	'Connecting the unconnected with broadband'; infrastructure; telecenters; digital divide	Lowest tier: provision and consumption of connectivity	Aspirational only (Sections 5.4, 3.4); no competency infrastructure
Analysis	3.1, 3.3–3.4, 3.6, 3.8; 5.2; 11.4–11.5; 16.2–16.3, 16.6; 17.3, 17.5; 18.7	'Market intensive skills'; 'market ready'; 'industry demands'; 'employability'	Mid-tier for Section 16.3 (STEM evaluation); otherwise, vocational	Economic rather than civic framing

Dimension	Principal provisions (verified)	Dominant register (verbatim lexical anchors)	Potter (2014) continuum position	Hobbs (2010) civic alignment
Evaluation	1.1.1; 8.1–8.2; 10.2; 12.4; 15.1 (institutional register only)	'Cost-benefit and security analysis'; accreditation; 'protocols and standards'	No citizen-level provision at any tier	Absent
Creation	3.12–3.13, 3.18; 6.1–6.3; 16.5	'Mass adoption and commercialization'; 'user adoption'; 'industry needs'	Production skill without reflexive critique	Commercially captured
Action	5.5; 10.3; 15.4 (3.4 borderline)	e-procurement; legal protection; ODR for 'low value civil claims'	Service use, not civic agency	Administrative-legal, not political-democratic

Note. Section numbers refer to the Digital Pakistan Policy 2018 (Ministry of IT & Telecom, 2018). Lexical anchors are verbatim phrases from the policy text; frequencies are reported in Table 3 and the full distribution in Table 6.

Table 6. Auditable inventory of Techno-Economic Framing (TEF) flagged provisions in the Digital Pakistan Policy 2018.

Provision	Primary dimension	Verbatim economic anchor (Ministry of IT & Telecom, 2018)
2.1	Access	"maximum economic impact"
2.3	Access	"Investment fund to help entrepreneurs and emerging technology startups"
3.2	Access	"to improve our knowledge economy"
14.4	Access	"culture of e-commerce"; "electronic business transactions"
14.6	Access	"enhance their effective participation in e-commerce activities"
3.1	Analysis	"market intensive skills"; "of relevance and value to the IT industry"
3.3	Analysis	"Bridge the gap between Industry and Academia" (industry alignment)
3.6	Analysis	"industry demands"; "market ready"; "employability"
3.8	Analysis	"equity sale and connecting these startups with relevant funding organizations"
16.2	Analysis	"relevance of ICT education to the industry needs"
17.5	Analysis	"align to the requirements of the industry"
3.12	Creation	"mass adoption and commercialization"
3.13	Creation	"seed funding"; "user adoption"
3.18	Creation	"digital skills training programs for freelancers" (within Software Exports cluster)

Note. The TEF code is an overlap flag applied alongside, not instead of, a primary dimension code (Table 1). Triggered in 14 of 118 provisions (11.9% of the corpus; 23.3% of the 60 provisions carrying citizen-competency content), distributed across Access (n = 5), Analysis (n = 6), and Creation (n = 3). No Evaluation (institutional register) or Action provision carried the TEF flag. Anchors are verbatim phrases from the policy text; the inventory is exhaustive and externally auditable.

CONCLUSION

The Digital Pakistan Policy 2018 reflects a major commitment to digital transformation; the success in infrastructure and economic competitiveness that deserves appreciation. However, the results of this deductive qualitative thematic analysis show little and structurally uneven support in building a media-literate citizenry, as defined by the UNESCO Media and Information Literacy Framework (UNESCO, 2013; Wilson et al., 2011). What characterizes the MIL integration is its nature of selectivity, not comprehensiveness; its focus on techno-economic factors, not civic engagement; and its aspirational quality, not operational mandate. The findings across all three forms of textual evidence establish internal consistency. Access is the main category, covering 25.4% of operative provisions, which reflects an infrastructure-first logic that equates connectivity with inclusion (Jamil, 2021; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014; Warschauer, 2004). Analysis is present (11.9%) but almost entirely subordinated to the vocational objectives (Buckingham, 2019; Potter, 2014). At 0.0% for citizen-facing provisions, the absence of Evaluation is especially significant because it is the dimension most predictive of resilience to misinformation (Guess et al., 2020; Jones-Jang et al., 2021; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Creation makes up 5.9% of the content; yet, it gets snatched up by commercial framing, stripping it of its civic and expressive core (Hobbs, 2010; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017). Action at 2.5% is structurally residual; the citizens are seen as service users and administrative transactors rather than active participants in a democratic process (Hobbs, 2010; Mihailidis, 2014).

These are not just hypothetical concerns. Pakistan's media and information environment has been documented as vulnerable to health and political disinformation, increased polarization due to platform dynamics, and digital gender-based harm (Ittefaq et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2023; Naveed eet al.,2025). A national digital policy seeking connectivity expansion without the concomitant development of the critical navigational competencies of citizens provides only partial insulation against information hazards and may inadvertently increase susceptibility to such risks (Guess et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2025; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The concept of ‘jagged integration’ introduced here gives a tool for understanding this structural trend, and a basis in theory for the policy changes that the evidence demands.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The subsequent evidence-based recommendations are targeted at the Ministry of IT and Telecom, the Higher Education Commission (HEC), the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, and relevant Parliamentary working groups, to be incorporated into Pakistan's upcoming national digital policy cycle. (Frau-Meigs et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2025):

Mandatory MIL Integration with Measurable Indicators

The five Media and Information Literacy (MIL) dimensions set by UNESCO should be integrated as strategic objectives in the next national digital policy explicitly. For this, each dimension should be accompanied by clearly defined key performance indicators to help in both implementation and assessment. (UNESCO, 2013; Wilson et al., 2011).

Cross-Sectoral Parliamentary Working Group on MIL

Coordination among the Ministry of IT and Telecom, the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting will be made possible by an expert Parliamentary Working Group. This is to be done in collaboration to help reduce the siloing that currently exists in the digital skills policy within a singular techno-economic ministry. (Frau-Meigs et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2020).

MIL Curriculum Integration from Primary to Tertiary Level

The HEC and provincial education departments should develop Media and Information Literacy (MIL) curricula, covering all five dimensions proposed by UNESCO, with special focus on Evaluation, source credibility, fact-checking, and lateral reading, and Action, which involves civic digital engagement and ethical content creation. Jamil et al., (2022) lay out a plan for curriculum and faculty development within the Pakistani context; Jeong et al., (2012) provide evidence of international effectiveness; and Guess et al., (2020) show the scalability of brief, evaluation-focused interventions in similar lower-middle-income settings.

Evidence-Based Public Awareness Programs

PEMRA should launch multilingual and region-specific public awareness campaigns with civil society organizations on board to address digital misinformation, online safety, and data privacy. It should be an approach to go beyond the 2018 policy that focuses on promoting access to ICT, to also foster the evaluative and actionable competencies (Guess et al., 2020; Ittefaq et al., 2020; Jones-Jang eet al.,2021).

Algorithmic Transparency Regulatory Standards

The PTA should set actionable regulatory guidelines for the promotion of algorithmic transparency and platform accountability by using the European Commission's Digital Services Act (2022) as a normative reference. This would help make governance conditions in which citizen evaluation competencies become practically significant (European Commission, 2022; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

SDG Accountability Linkage

Pakistan should ensure that its national digital policies are systematically aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) as part of Voluntary National Review commitments. This alignment will establish an external accountability mechanism for the integration of Media and Information Literacy (MIL), a must for building sustainable, democratic digital governance. (United Nations, 2015; UNESCO, 2013).

Future Researches

Research in four domains is suggested for future studies: the implementation of mixed-method designs that incorporate policy text analysis with stakeholder interviews in the Ministry of Information Technology, the Higher Education Commission, and civil society; longitudinal comparisons of subsequent iterations of digital policy in Pakistan; cross-national comparative research that uses the same deductive UNESCO Media and Information Literacy coding framework to test the generalizability of 'jagged integration' in other national digital policies within South or Southeast Asia; and citizen-level reception studies on how Media and Information Literacy competencies are (or are not) formed among digital users in Pakistan when there is no policy support (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

LIMITATIONS AND POSITIONALITY

Results of this study can be generalized with two major caveats. First, the analysis is limited to one policy document; the Digital Pakistan Policy 2018 works as one document in a broader ecosystem of ministerial guidelines, curriculum frameworks, and provincial instruments that is beyond the scope of this study (Schreier, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Second, qualitative thematic analysis is interpretive by nature, and the categorization of provisions into dimensions calls for analytical judgments. These judgments are systematically documented and grounded in theory but cannot claim complete objectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Morrow, 2005). The coding framework, corpus map, lexical evidence base, and provision-level distribution are tabulated (Tables 1–4) precisely to enable scrutiny and contestation; the complete unit-level coding matrix enables contestation of every coding decision, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) transparency criteria and Krippendorff's (2019) analytical trail documentation principle.

The distinction between provisions coded as citizen-competency dimensions with a TEF flag (e.g., vocational analysis, commercial creation) and provisions coded NR rests on interpretive judgment. A more rigorous coding rule that classifies economically framed provisions as irrelevant would lead to a small drop in absolute counts within the Access, Analysis, and Creation categories. However, it would not alter, and might even strengthen, the central finding: the systematic predominance of techno-economic provisions over critical-evaluative and civic provisions, as well as the total absence of citizen-oriented Evaluation. The researchers' positionality therefore acts as a major analytical asset and a source of contextual familiarity with Pakistan's information environment, policy discourse, and scholarly debate, enriching the interpretive analysis in ways an outside view cannot match (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Morrow, 2005).

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