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Online Academic Conferences as Media Education Platforms in Higher Education: Faculty Digital Competence and Professional Identity

Shahid Rafiq [a, *]

[a] King's College London, United Kingdom

Abstract

As digital technologies continue to reshape professional development in higher education, online academic conferences have emerged as accessible spaces where university teachers engage with new pedagogies, digital tools, and professional networks. This study explores how online academic conferences contribute to university teachers' digital competence in contemporary higher education in Pakistan. Drawing on the DigCompEdu framework, the study adopts a qualitative interpretivist approach to examine the experiences of 25 university teachers from three public universities in Multan, Pakistan, who participated in online academic conferences. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and written reflections and was analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that online academic conferences supported participants' professional engagement, use of digital resources, and teaching and learning practices, while more limited evidence emerged in the areas of digital assessment and facilitating learners' digital competence. Participants also described shifts in confidence, professional identity, and sense of belonging within wider academic networks. At the same time, gendered access, infrastructural limitations, and lack of institutional follow-up affected the depth and sustainability of these experiences. The study argues that online academic conferences can function as meaningful spaces for faculty professional learning in under-resourced higher education contexts when supported through intentional design and institutional recognition.

Keywords: digital competence, DigCompEdu, online academic conferences, university teachers, higher education, professional development.

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies in education has reshaped how university teachers engage in professional development. Online academic conferences have emerged as one of the most accessible and scalable professional learning opportunities for educators worldwide, particularly after the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Cutri et al., 2020; König et al., 2020). These virtual conferences allow university teachers to access current research, emerging pedagogies, digital tools, and professional networks — often at minimal cost and across geographical boundaries (Niner, Wassermann, 2021; Seidenberg et al., 2021). However, despite their growing popularity, these spaces are rarely examined as media education platforms, which go beyond access and attendance to consider the learning ecology, digital identity construction, and media-mediated pedagogical transformation they enable.

The term media education traditionally refers to the development of critical understanding and responsible use of media (Buckingham, 2003), but in the context of teacher professional

* Corresponding author
E-mail addresses: shahid.rafiq@kcl.ac.uk (S. Rafiq)

development, it can also encompass digital immersion, collaborative engagement, and pedagogical reflection fostered in technology-mediated spaces (Jenkins, Ito, 2015). Online conferences are more than delivery mechanisms, they represent interactive and participatory environments where meaning is constructed through both content and the digital medium itself. As such, they can function as media ecologies that influence how teachers see themselves, their roles, and their capacity to teach in a digital world (Rapanta et al., 2020; Selwyn, 2021).

In Pakistan, this shift is both promising and complex. Although there has been a marked increase in the number of online professional learning events organized by universities, NGOs, and independent networks, university teachers still face systemic barriers to digital participation, including poor connectivity, limited access to devices, and uneven institutional support (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022; Jamil, Muschert, 2023). Teachers' experiences in these conferences are likely shaped not only by their digital proficiency but also by their sense of agency, emotional readiness, and perceived value of technology in teaching (Artino et al., 2012; Jang, 2024).

To better understand the professional learning potential of online conferences, this study draws upon the Digital Competence Framework for Educators (DigCompEdu) developed by the European Commission (Redecker, Punie, 2017). This framework identifies six core domains of educator competence in digital contexts: Professional Engagement, Digital Resources, Teaching and Learning, Assessment, Empowering Learners, and Facilitating Learners' Digital Competence. While prior research often applies this framework in quantitative evaluation studies (SEM or regression models), this study uses DigCompEdu qualitatively as an interpretive lens to explore how these domains manifest through teachers' reflective experiences of participating in online conferences.

From the above rationale, this study aims to:

1. Explore how university teachers in three public universities experience participation in online academic conferences, with particular attention to digital interaction, pedagogical reflection, and professional growth.
2. Interpret how the domains of the DigCompEdu framework are reflected in university teachers' narratives and how these shape their digital competence and instructional practices.
3. Examine how participation in online academic conferences influences university teachers' confidence, professional identity, and perceived agency in digital teaching environments.

Research Questions: aligned with the objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do university teachers in three public universities in Multan, Pakistan, perceive and interpret their participation in online academic conferences?
2. Which domains of digital competence, as described in the DigCompEdu framework, are evident in university teachers' reflections, and how are these applied in practice?
3. In what ways does participation in online academic conferences influence university teachers' professional identity, confidence, and perceived agency in digital teaching environments?

Literature Review: the integration of media education into teacher professional development (PD) has gained renewed importance in the digital era, particularly in response to the global pivot toward remote and hybrid learning. Traditionally, media education was concerned with fostering critical literacy, the ability to understand, analyze, and produce media content responsibly (Buckingham, 2003). However, in the context of teacher PD, media education must be reimagined as an immersive and reflective practice. This perspective moves beyond the acquisition of digital tools to include the development of pedagogical insight, professional identity, and critical engagement with the digital environments in which teachers operate (Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2015; Potter, McDougall, 2017; Selwyn, 2021).

One growing area within this discourse is the role of online academic conferences as transformative spaces for teacher learning. Such conferences offer more than exposure to content; they create opportunities for dialogic interaction, collaboration, and identity reconstruction (Rapanta et al., 2020). Teachers engaging in these virtual spaces often reframe their professional roles as they participate in global conversations, encounter diverse perspectives, and explore new pedagogical paradigms. These experiences are especially important in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where limited access to traditional PD models makes online formats more accessible and potentially empowering (Niner, Wassermann, 2021; Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, 2001).

The notion of digital competence has also evolved significantly. Once limited to operational or technical skills, it is now recognized as a broader construct that includes pedagogical innovation, reflective practice, assessment literacy, and learner empowerment (Ferrari, 2013; Redecker, Punie,

2017). Frameworks like DigCompEdu have formalized these competencies, yet many studies continue to treat them as measurable outcomes rather than lived experiences. This creates a need for more detailed, qualitative investigations into how teachers actually develop and express digital competence within mediated learning environments.

In the Pakistani context, research has documented persistent digital inequities, particularly between public and private institutions, urban and rural settings, and male and female educators (Jamil, Muschert, 2023; Shoaib et al., 2025). While some studies have explored the effectiveness of online PD programs (Mahmood, 2021), most have relied on surveys or assessments that offer limited insight into teachers' reflective processes or identity shifts. Media exposure in PD is often treated as peripheral or secondary, despite its central role in shaping how teachers perceive themselves and their students in a digital learning culture.

Importantly, a significant gap in the literature lies in the limited number of qualitative studies that explore how university teachers experience digitally mediated professional development through online academic conferences, particularly in under-resourced higher education contexts. Most existing research emphasizes quantifiable impacts, such as gains in knowledge or frequency of tool use, without exploring how teachers construct meaning from their participation in online conferences. This study addresses that gap by centering university teachers' narratives and using the DigCompEdu framework to investigate digital professional learning as a reflective and contextually situated process.

Conceptual Framework: this study draws upon interrelated theoretical perspectives to examine how online academic conferences shape university teachers' digital competence, professional identity, and engagement in digitally mediated professional learning. First, the study is informed by media ecology theory, which views learning environments as dynamic systems shaped by technologies, communication practices, and culture (McLuhan, 1994; Selwyn, 2021; Tinák, Gálik, 2026). From this perspective, online academic conferences can be understood as media-rich and participatory environments in which university teachers interact with knowledge, peers, and digital pedagogies in flexible ways (Jenkins, Ito, 2015). Within this framework, media education is not only about content consumption but about reflective, identity-forming experiences enabled by digital platforms (Buckingham, 2003).

The second pillar of the framework is the DigCompEdu model (Redecker, Punie, 2017), which outlines six domains of digital competence: Professional Engagement, Digital Resources, Teaching and Learning, Assessment, Empowering Learners, and Facilitating Learners' Digital Competence. In this study, DigCompEdu is applied qualitatively as a coding framework to interpret how these domains appear in teachers' narratives and reflections during their online conference participation.

Thirdly, the study integrates perspectives on teacher identity and self-efficacy. Teachers' identities evolve through social interaction and experience, particularly in digital contexts where roles and expectations shift (Beijaard et al., 2004). At the same time, self-efficacy, teachers' beliefs in their ability to use technology effectively, shapes how they engage with and apply new learning (Bandura, 1997; Jang, 2024). High self-efficacy supports confidence and experimentation; low self-efficacy may lead to resistance or disengagement.

Together, these concepts provide a lens to examine online conferences as complex environments of digital transformation, where teachers' competence, identity, and agency intersect, as shown in Figure 1.

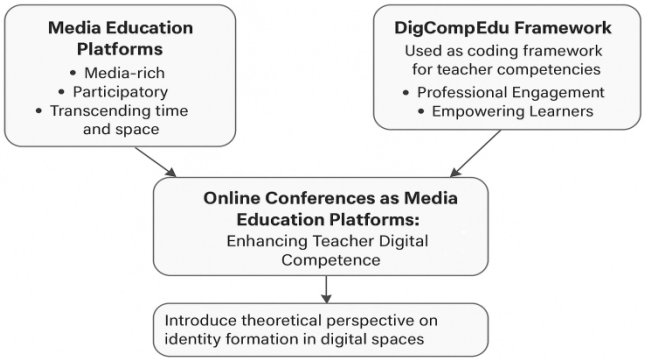


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the study

2. Materials and methods

This study is guided by the interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the subjective experiences of individuals. Interpretivism aligns with the study's aim to explore teachers' lived experiences of online academic conferences as spaces for media education and digital transformation. Unlike positivist approaches that seek objective truths, this paradigm supports deep, contextualized understanding by emphasizing meaning-making and reflective narratives (Creswell, Poth, 2017; Merriam, Tisdell, 2016).

Given the focus on meaning, experience, and professional change in digital learning spaces, the study adopts a qualitative interpretive design. This design is appropriate because it allows an in-depth exploration of how university teachers make sense of their participation in online academic conferences and how they connect these experiences to their pedagogical practices, confidence, and professional identities.

The participants in this study were 25 university teachers from three public sector universities in Multan, Pakistan. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling and were required to have attended at least one online academic conference in the previous two years. The sample was intended to reflect variation in gender, discipline, teaching experience, and levels of digital access in order to capture a range of perspectives relevant to the study objectives.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, complemented by written reflection prompts sent to participants prior to the interview. This two-step strategy encouraged deeper introspection, allowing participants to articulate their experiences before expanding on them during the interview sessions. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was conducted in English or Urdu, depending on participant preference. All interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (Braun, Clarke, 2006). The process began with open coding, during which recurring concepts and insights were identified. These initial codes were then mapped onto the six domains of the DigCompEdu framework (Redecker, Punie, 2017), including Professional Engagement, Digital Resources, Teaching and Learning, Assessment, Empowering Learners, and Facilitating Learners' Digital Competence. In addition to domain alignment, the analysis focused on identifying narrative threads around themes such as media engagement, professional identity, emotional responses, and pedagogical change. This dual-layered approach allowed for both structured analysis and open-ended exploration of meaning.

Ethical considerations were central throughout the research process. All participants provided informed consent and were briefed on the voluntary nature of their participation. Pseudonyms were used to anonymize identities, and all digital files were stored securely. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence.

3. Discussion

This study suggests that online academic conferences should not be viewed merely as content delivery events, but as digitally mediated professional learning environments in which university teachers engage with new tools, pedagogical ideas, and professional networks in complex ways. Participants described experiences of overload, reflection, experimentation, and redefinition, indicating that conference participation influenced not only what they learned but also how they understood their roles as digital educators.

These findings show that digital professional learning involves more than technical skill acquisition; it also includes the development of teacher identity, self-efficacy, and professional agency (Beijaard et al., 2004; Rapanta et al., 2020). Faculty engaged deeply with conference content and formats, yet this engagement varied based on personal background, digital access, and contextual support.

When mapped onto the DigCompEdu framework (Redecker, Punie, 2017), the findings show a strong presence in domains like Professional Engagement, Digital Resources, and Teaching & Learning. Faculty actively participated in online academic communities, explored new digital tools, and began to reimagine their pedagogical approaches. However, there were evident gaps in Assessment and Facilitating Learners' Digital Competence, two domains critical for sustainable

digital transformation (Ferrari, 2013). Very few participants discussed revising their assessment methods, and most admitted to overlooking strategies for developing students' own digital skills.

Contextual challenges specific to the Global South, such as low bandwidth, limited institutional mentorship, and gendered expectations, shaped participants' engagement and constrained the implementation of new practices (Jamil, Muschert, 2023; Shoaib et al., 2025). Female university teachers in particular highlighted domestic disruptions and digital hesitation, while others noted a disconnect between personal learning and institutional recognition structures. This reflects a larger pattern where teacher growth is not matched by supportive policy or infrastructure.

These findings resonate with international literature that highlights the identity-forming potential of online PD (Rapanta et al., 2020), the importance of digital pedagogical design (Selwyn, 2021), and the democratizing effect of virtual formats (Niner, Wassermann, 2021). Yet, most global studies assume a level of access and institutional responsiveness that may not exist in the Pakistani context, pointing to the need for localized research and policy alignment.

If online conferences are to function as true media education platforms, they must be intentionally designed not just to deliver content, but to engage identity, reflection, and professional transformation. Organizers should consider including follow-up mentoring, institutional recognition, and student-focused modules, so that digital engagement leads to systemic change. In short, the move from participation to transformation requires designing with media, not just through media.

Implications: This study highlights that online conferences must be designed not just as content delivery tools but as media-rich environments that support teacher identity, reflection, and pedagogical change. Organizers should align content with all DigCompEdu domains, especially those often neglected, such as Assessment and Facilitating Learners' Digital Competence. Institutions should recognize participation through formal incentives, appraisal integration, and structured mentoring, helping sustain post-conference transformation. Addressing gender and access disparities is essential for equitable engagement, particularly in low-resource settings.

Furthermore, educators need ongoing support to translate digital exposure into classroom innovation, which requires local ownership, follow-up workshops, and contextually relevant resources. Ultimately, professional development should adopt a media education lens, treating online spaces as opportunities for deeper learning, identity formation, and long-term digital empowerment.

Limitations: This study has several limitations. First, it is based on a relatively small qualitative sample of 25 university teachers from three public universities in Multan, Pakistan; therefore, the findings are not intended to be generalized to all higher education contexts. Second, the study relies on self-reported experiences rather than classroom observation or longitudinal follow-up. Third, participants' reflections were shaped by differences in digital access, institutional support, and personal circumstances, which may have influenced the depth of engagement reported in the study. Future research may build on these findings through comparative, mixed-method, or longitudinal designs across a wider range of universities.

4. Results

The analysis of interviews and written reflections with 25 university teachers revealed multiple intersecting layers of experience, emotion, and professional change related to participation in online academic conferences. These experiences were shaped not just by content exposure but by how participants navigated the media environment, perceived their own evolving competence, and positioned themselves within digital professional spaces. Using thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, 2006), the data was first inductively coded and then mapped onto the DigCompEdu framework (Redecker, Punie, 2017), while also attending to broader patterns of identity, self-efficacy, and media engagement. The findings are organized below as thematic narratives that reflect both convergence and diversity across participant stories.

Theme 1: Online Conferences as Disruptive Media Spaces: many participants described online conferences as overwhelming yet eye-opening experiences, particularly for those attending for the first time. The media-rich nature of these platforms, slides, breakout rooms, chat flows, pre-readings, and simultaneous sessions created a sense of "information flooding". Yet, this exposure also acted as a disruption to conventional, passive PD formats.

"*I remember entering this international Zoom conference and, within 15 minutes, I was completely lost. People were talking in the chat, others speaking on screen, links being shared,*

my mind couldn't process all of it. But slowly I started to pick up patterns, and I realized that learning wasn't just from the speaker but from everything happening around".

Participant 4, Male, Public University A.

"It was a bit of a shock. I've been teaching for 18 years, but this was the first time I felt like a student again, confused, trying to follow different speakers, seeing tools I had never used. But it was exciting too. I felt like I was in a global classroom". Participant 9, Female, Public University C.

These responses suggest that online conferences function as disruptive media ecologies, aligning with the idea of media education spaces that challenge familiar pedagogical rhythms. They create not only access to new ideas but also *awareness of one's digital limitations*.

Theme 2: From Tool Use to Pedagogical Change: Several participants noted a shift from simply learning digital tools to rethinking their teaching strategies, marking a movement along the DigCompEdu continuum from basic resource use to applied pedagogy.

"Initially, I was just learning how to use Menti or Padlet. But after the second or third session, I started thinking, what is the purpose of these tools? Am I using them just to impress students or to really change how I teach? That reflection came from listening to other educators in the conference". Participant 7, Male, Public University B.

"Earlier, I was just uploading slides. After attending a digital pedagogy session, I started redesigning my entire module to include student interaction, using asynchronous forums and digital feedback. It wasn't just about the tool, it was about the mindset". Participant 12, Female, Public University C.

These experiences map onto the Teaching and Learning and Digital Resources domains of DigCompEdu, with participants evolving from passive users to reflective practitioners.

Theme 3: Confidence, Resistance, and Gendered Digital Experience: Confidence levels varied sharply, particularly along gender and access lines. Female faculty often reported challenges related to technology anxiety, lack of institutional support, or domestic interruptions.

"I had to fight for quiet space at home to attend the conference. My children were around, and I didn't feel confident turning on my camera. Also, some of the tools were being discussed as if everyone already knew them; it was intimidating". Participant 15, Female, Public University A

"As a woman, I felt like I had to prove I could manage the tech just as well as my male colleagues. There was resistance in me; I thought this was not for me. But after hearing stories from other female educators in the sessions, I started feeling more capable". Participant 22, Female, Public University B.

This theme touches on self-efficacy, professional identity, and the Empowering Learners domain, showing how media engagement is also filtered through sociocultural and gendered realities.

Theme 4: Emergent Digital Identity: A major theme was the evolution of digital identity; participants began to see themselves as not just teachers, but as digital actors in a global professional space.

"Earlier, I thought of myself as a traditional lecturer. After the conference, I started using the term 'digital educator', and I meant it. I changed my LinkedIn bio. I felt like I belonged in a global academic network". Participant 6, Male, Public University C.

"When I saw other faculty sharing their digital teaching portfolios, I was inspired. I realized that I could curate my work too. I wasn't just surviving online; I was shaping my digital self". Participant 13, Female, Public University B.

This shift reflects intersections between Professional Engagement, media identity, and teacher agency. Online conferences became spaces for re-authoring one's role in a digital academic landscape.

Theme 5: Community and Professional Belonging: Several faculty members spoke of gaining a sense of connection and community through repeated participation in conferences, especially during the isolation of the COVID era.

"I joined a WhatsApp group with people I met during the session. We now exchange resources and ideas regularly. It doesn't feel like I'm working alone anymore". Participant 1, Male, Public University A.

"That session gave me my first professional network outside my university. I now co-host webinars with two educators I met at that event. It was empowering to feel part of something bigger". Participant 8, Female, Public University C.

This relates strongly to the Professional Engagement domain of DigCompEdu and shows how media spaces cultivate peer mentorship and knowledge networks.

Theme 6: Gaps in Facilitating Student Digital Competence: A notable silence across most interviews was in actively enabling students' digital skills. While teachers improved their own competence, few integrated strategies to empower learners technologically.

"I became more confident using digital tools, but honestly, I didn't think about whether my students were becoming digitally literate. That wasn't part of the conversation in the conference". Participant 17, Male, Public University B.

"We discussed assessment tools and feedback, but nothing about how to teach students to critically use or create digital content. Maybe we assumed they already knew". Participant 11, Female, Public University A.

This absence highlights a major gap in the DigCompEdu domain of Facilitating Learners' Digital Competence, suggesting an area where conference design and follow-up could improve.

Theme 7: Need for Institutional Follow-up and Recognition: Despite positive experiences, participants expressed frustration that their learning was not formally recognized or integrated into institutional PD structures.

"I attended five conferences last year. None of it counts for promotion or appraisal. It feels like my effort is invisible unless I publish something". Participant 5, Male, Public University C.

"I gained so much, but there is no system to implement what I learned. No workshops, no support group, no follow-up. So, the ideas just stay in my head". Participant 20, Female, Public University B.

This indicates a disconnect between individual growth and institutional frameworks, reinforcing the need for structured integration of online PD into university policies.

Table 1. Themes Extracted through Thematic Analysis

Initial Coding	Sub-Themes	Theme
Zoom fatigue, multitasking, rapid chat flow, breakout rooms, screen overload, media noise, session hopping, cognitive strain.	Media intensity, fragmented attention, unfamiliar environment, information chaos, digital overwhelm.	Online Conferences as Disruptive Media Spaces.
Slide sharing, tool demonstration, audience response tools, content redesign, digital lesson planning, formative feedback, active learning, asynchronous delivery.	Pedagogical reflection, practice redesign, meaningful tool use, learning transformation, instructional shift.	From Tool Use to Pedagogical Change.
Camera anxiety, gender norms, household duties, digital stress, tool unfamiliarity, silence in sessions, access gap, self-doubt.	Confidence barriers, digital exclusion, unequal access, gendered experiences, resistance to tech.	Confidence, Resistance, and Gendered Digital Experience
LinkedIn update, digital CV, tech-savvy label, visibility, sharing work online, content curation, professional image, online presence.	Reinvention of self, digital agency, identity expansion, global belonging, self-recognition.	Emergent Digital Identity.
WhatsApp groups, networking, follow-up meetings, mutual invitations, knowledge sharing, emotional support, collaboration, mentorship.	Peer connection, shared learning, emotional validation, ongoing dialogue, professional bonding.	Community and Professional Belonging.
Student neglect, tech assumption, no training, critical use ignored, limited support, passive learners, content delivery only, one-way interaction.	Overlooked student needs, unplanned digital skills, teacher-centric sessions, student disengagement, low digital transfer.	Gaps in Facilitating Student Digital Competence.
No credit, lack of recognition, appraisal mismatch, administrative silence, institutional disconnect, no PD policy, unsupported growth, frustration.	Recognition gap, unvalued learning, policy vacuum, misaligned evaluation, implementation failure.	Need for Institutional Follow-up and Recognition.

Table 1 presents the thematic analysis, revealing a rich ecosystem of teacher experiences shaped by their engagement with online conferences as media education platforms. These environments often began as disruptive media spaces, marked by cognitive overload, multitasking, and digital fatigue. However, for many educators, this exposure catalyzed a shift from basic tool use to pedagogical transformation, enabling them to rethink lesson delivery and assessment practices. Simultaneously, participants, especially women, encountered confidence challenges and gendered digital resistance, stemming from cultural expectations and household pressures. Despite these barriers, teachers reported the emergence of digital identities, reshaping their professional self-image and gaining visibility in virtual spaces. Informal connections fostered through WhatsApp groups and follow-up collaborations nurtured a strong sense of community and professional belonging, validating their efforts emotionally and intellectually. Yet, a significant gap remained in the translation of these learnings to student digital empowerment, with limited focus on learner-centered strategies. All these themes eventually converged into a critical tension: the lack of institutional follow-up and recognition, where teachers' growth was neither formally acknowledged nor supported through policy or appraisal systems. As shown in Figure 2, these interconnected dimensions illustrate that online conferences function as transformative yet incomplete media education experiences, demanding more intentional design and systemic integration.



Fig. 2. Word cloud map of thematic analysis

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that online academic conferences hold significant potential as professional learning spaces for university teachers, particularly in public-sector higher education settings where access to continuous development opportunities may be limited. Conferences become truly meaningful when they go beyond tool demonstrations to include reflective spaces, opportunities for post-conference mentoring, and engagement with media-critical pedagogies. These elements allow educators not only to acquire digital skills but also to rethink their professional identities and practices in response to evolving digital landscapes.

While the DigCompEdu framework provided a helpful structure for analyzing teacher competence development, the findings suggest that its application in contexts like Pakistan requires local adaptation. Factors such as infrastructure gaps, cultural norms, and institutional inertia must be considered to make such frameworks genuinely effective and inclusive.

Based on these insights, several recommendations are proposed. For policymakers, there is a need to support blended professional development models and digital equity initiatives that ensure all educators, regardless of gender or location, can participate meaningfully in digital learning spaces. For conference organizers, it is essential to embed emotional, collaborative, and context-sensitive support into event design, ensuring that conferences nurture not just knowledge, but also community and confidence. Finally, for researchers, there is a growing need to explore teacher

identity, self-efficacy, and narrative change within digital PD environments, especially in under-researched Global South settings.

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