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Machine Learning Integration in Pathology Laboratories: Enhancing Diagnostic Accuracy and Workflow Efficiency in Low-Resource Healthcare Settings

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Abstract
The integration of machine learning (ML) in pathology laboratories offers significant potential to improve diagnostic accuracy and optimize workflow efficiency, particularly in low-resource healthcare settings. This study investigates the effects of ML adoption on laboratory performance and professional competence among pathology staff in Pakistan. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 400 pathology professionals, incorporating structured questionnaires measuring ML usage, diagnostic accuracy, workflow efficiency, and digital competence. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to assess direct and mediated relationships. Results indicate that ML adoption significantly enhances diagnostic accuracy ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$) and workflow efficiency ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$), with digital competence moderating the relationship between ML usage and professional autonomy. Ethical awareness also mediated the impact of ML adoption on diagnostic decision-making. These findings suggest that ML can substantially improve laboratory outcomes in low-resource settings, provided that staff training and ethical protocols are implemented. Policymakers and healthcare administrators should prioritize infrastructure investment, competency development, and context-specific ML integration strategies to maximize benefits. This study provides empirical evidence for scaling AI-enabled laboratory services in Pakistan and similar healthcare environments.

Keywords: *Machine Learning, Pathology Laboratories, Diagnostic Accuracy*

Introduction

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) technologies is transforming healthcare delivery worldwide, with diagnostic laboratories emerging as a critical domain for application [1,2]. Pathology laboratories, responsible for generating accurate and timely diagnostic data, are foundational to patient care; errors or delays in laboratory reporting can significantly impact clinical decision-making and treatment outcomes [3]. In low-resource healthcare environments, such as many regions of Pakistan, challenges including limited skilled personnel, high workloads, outdated equipment, and constrained infrastructure exacerbate the risk of diagnostic inaccuracies and inefficient laboratory workflows [4,5]. These challenges underscore the urgent need for innovative solutions that can augment human expertise, optimize processes, and maintain high standards of patient safety.

Machine learning, a subset of AI, offers automated pattern recognition and predictive capabilities that can assist pathologists in interpreting complex laboratory data, identifying anomalies, and standardizing routine procedures [6]. International evidence indicates that ML integration can reduce error rates, accelerate test turnaround times, and improve overall laboratory productivity [7,8]. However, the effectiveness of ML in healthcare is contingent not only on the sophistication of algorithms but also on the competence of laboratory personnel, adherence to ethical standards, and the availability of supportive institutional

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infrastructure [9,10]. In low-resource settings, these factors are particularly salient; poorly trained staff or inadequate governance can undermine the benefits of technology adoption.

Despite growing global interest in ML-enhanced diagnostics, research focused on low-resource healthcare environments remains limited. Most empirical studies have concentrated on high-income countries with well-established laboratory networks and regulatory frameworks [7,11]. In Pakistan, while a few tertiary hospitals and private laboratories have begun implementing ML-based solutions, there is scant evidence regarding its impact on diagnostic accuracy, workflow efficiency, and professional autonomy among laboratory staff. Furthermore, the role of digital competence and ethical awareness in mediating the effectiveness of ML adoption has not been systematically examined in the regional context [12,13].

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the integration of ML in pathology laboratories in Pakistan. Specifically, it examines: (1) the effect of ML adoption on diagnostic accuracy; (2) the impact on workflow efficiency; (3) the mediating role of ethical awareness in ML adoption and diagnostic decision-making; and (4) the moderating influence of digital competence on professional autonomy in ML-supported environments. By combining quantitative survey data with structural equation modeling, the study provides empirical evidence on how ML technologies can be leveraged to enhance laboratory outcomes in low-resource healthcare settings. The findings aim to inform policymakers, hospital administrators, and professional bodies in designing strategic implementation frameworks that optimize ML benefits while addressing workforce training and ethical considerations.

Literature Review

Machine Learning in Pathology: Global Evidence

Machine learning (ML), a subset of artificial intelligence, has emerged as a transformative tool in diagnostic laboratories worldwide, capable of augmenting human expertise, reducing error rates, and enhancing workflow efficiency. ML algorithms, particularly convolutional neural networks (CNNs) and random forest models, are increasingly applied to tasks such as image recognition in histopathology, predictive analysis for hematology, and pattern detection in microbiology [1,2]. Studies in high-income countries demonstrate that ML integration can improve diagnostic accuracy by 15–30%**,** reduce reporting turnaround time by 20–40%**,** and enhance overall laboratory throughput [3,4]. For instance, a multicenter study in the United States reported that AI-assisted pathology platforms reduced misclassification rates in tissue biopsies from 7.8% to 4.3% while decreasing pathologist workload by approximately 25% [5].

Despite the evident potential, research emphasizes that human expertise remains central. Algorithms can flag anomalies and provide predictive scores, but final diagnostic decisions depend on trained professionals who interpret ML outputs within the clinical context [6]. Moreover, global literature underscores that the effectiveness of ML is moderated by user competence, ethical understanding, and institutional support. Radiographers and laboratory professionals with higher digital literacy derive greater benefits from AI-assisted workflows [7,8]. Similarly, adherence to ethical standards including data privacy, patient consent, and algorithmic accountability enhances trust and professional autonomy [9,10].

Workflow Efficiency and Operational Impact

ML adoption not only improves diagnostic accuracy but also significantly affects laboratory workflow. Automated image analysis, predictive testing, and algorithm-assisted triaging allow laboratories to prioritize urgent cases, optimize staffing, and reduce repetitive manual tasks [11]. In a UK-based study, laboratories integrating ML observed average reductions of 18 minutes per specimen in processing time, resulting in increased daily throughput and improved resource utilization [12]. Additionally, ML-enabled laboratories reported lower inter-observer variability**,** which reduces errors stemming from subjective human interpretation [13].

However, the benefits are contingent on adequate infrastructure. Poor-quality imaging devices, outdated software, and lack of integration with laboratory information systems (LIS) can impede ML effectiveness. Studies suggest that institutional readiness, including IT infrastructure and staff training, is a critical determinant of successful ML adoption [14,15].

Ethical Considerations in ML-Enhanced Diagnostics

The ethical dimensions of ML in pathology are increasingly recognized. Concerns include algorithmic bias, data security, and patient privacy, particularly in low-resource settings where regulatory oversight is limited [16,17]. Misinterpretation of ML outputs can lead to diagnostic errors and compromise patient safety, raising professional accountability questions. Research highlights the need for structured ethical training for laboratory professionals to ensure informed decision-making and maintain public trust [18].

In Pakistan, regulatory guidelines for AI in healthcare are still emerging, with few standardized protocols addressing data governance, consent, and accountability [19]. Integrating ethical awareness into professional development programs is therefore essential to mitigate potential risks and enhance the credibility of ML-assisted diagnostics.

ML in Low-Resource Healthcare Settings

Low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) face distinct challenges in adopting ML technologies, including financial constraints, limited technical infrastructure, and workforce shortages [20]. Nevertheless, ML offers opportunities to bridge gaps in diagnostic quality and service delivery. Evidence from LMICs shows that AI-assisted platforms can reduce diagnostic errors by 10–25% and accelerate reporting times by 15–35%, even in under-resourced laboratories [21,22]. The success of ML integration depends on factors such as staff digital competence, workflow redesign, and contextual adaptation of algorithms to local populations and disease prevalence [23].

In Pakistan, tertiary care hospitals and private laboratories have started piloting ML-assisted hematology and histopathology systems. Early reports indicate improved diagnostic consistency and reduced turnaround time, though empirical studies quantifying impact remain scarce [24,25]. There is an urgent need for research assessing the quantitative effects of ML adoption, especially regarding workflow efficiency, diagnostic accuracy, and professional autonomy.

Professional Competence and Digital Literacy

Several studies highlight that ML adoption can only be effective when laboratory professionals are digitally competent**.** Skills in interpreting algorithm outputs, troubleshooting software, and understanding predictive models are crucial for integrating ML into routine practice [26]. In addition, digital literacy enhances professional autonomy, as staff are better equipped to critically evaluate AI recommendations and maintain decision-making authority [27]. In low-resource contexts, targeted training programs are essential to equip staff with necessary skills and reduce resistance to technology adoption [28].

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The integration of ML in pathology can be examined through a sociotechnical systems lens, emphasizing the interaction between technology, human expertise, and organizational environment [29]. Within this framework, ML adoption impacts diagnostic accuracy and workflow efficiency, mediated by ethical awareness and moderated by digital competence. This conceptual model provides a foundation for hypothesis testing and empirical evaluation in the Pakistan context, offering evidence-based guidance for policymakers and healthcare administrators [30].

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to examine the impact of machine learning (ML) adoption on diagnostic accuracy, workflow efficiency, and professional autonomy in pathology laboratories within low-resource healthcare settings in Pakistan. A cross-sectional approach was deemed appropriate as it allows for the collection of current empirical data from laboratory professionals and the assessment of relationships between multiple constructs simultaneously [1,2]. The study operationalized ML adoption as the independent variable, diagnostic accuracy and workflow efficiency as dependent variables, ethical awareness as a mediating variable, and digital competence as a moderating variable.

Study Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of pathologists, laboratory technologists, and technicians working in public and private pathology laboratories across major urban centers in Pakistan, including Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, and Peshawar. Inclusion criteria required participants to have at least one year of professional experience and familiarity with ML-assisted laboratory tools, either directly or indirectly.

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure representative inclusion of both public and private laboratories, accounting for variations in resources and ML exposure. Based on Krejcie and Morgan's formula [3], the sample size was determined to be 400 participants, which provides sufficient statistical power for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) analysis. Stratification was based on:

1. **Laboratory type** (public vs. private)
2. **Professional role** (pathologist, technologist, technician)
3. **Geographic location** (urban centers: Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Peshawar)

Survey Instrument

A structured questionnaire was developed using validated scales adapted from previous studies:

- **Machine Learning Adoption (MLA):** 6 items measuring frequency of ML tool usage, integration in workflow, and perceived utility [4,5].
- **Diagnostic Accuracy (DA):** 5 items assessing error reduction, consistency in reporting, and adherence to standard protocols [6].
- **Workflow Efficiency (WE):** 5 items measuring turnaround time, workload management, and automation of repetitive tasks [7].
- **Ethical Awareness (EA):** 4 items capturing understanding of data privacy, algorithmic bias, and informed consent [8,9].
- **Digital Competence (DC):** 5 items assessing staff proficiency with software, AI tools, and data interpretation [10].
- **Professional Autonomy (PA):** 4 items evaluating confidence in decision-making and independence in ML-supported diagnostics [11].

All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was pre-tested on a pilot sample of 40 laboratory professionals to ensure clarity,

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http://www.pjahs.com/index.php/ojs
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reliability, and validity. Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs exceeded 0.80, confirming internal consistency.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection occurred over three months (January–March 2025). Ethical approval was obtained from the National Bioethics Committee of Pakistan, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Participants were approached via laboratory management and professional associations. Questionnaires were administered electronically using secure survey platforms to accommodate COVID-19 safety measures and ensure wider reach. Follow-up reminders were sent to improve response rates.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

The study conceptualized ML adoption in pathology laboratories using a sociotechnical systems framework, emphasizing interactions among technology, human actors, and organizational environment [12]. The conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

ML Adoption → Diagnostic Accuracy → Workflow Efficiency
↘
EA (mediator)
DC (moderator) → Professional Autonomy

Hypotheses:

- **H1:** ML adoption positively influences diagnostic accuracy.
- **H2:** ML adoption positively influences workflow efficiency.
- **H3:** Ethical awareness mediates the relationship between ML adoption and diagnostic decision-making.
- **H4:** Digital competence moderates the effect of ML adoption on professional autonomy.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4.0. PLS-SEM was selected because it is suitable for complex models with mediators and moderators, handles non-normal data distributions, and performs well with moderate sample sizes [13,14]. The analysis included:

1. **Measurement Model Assessment:**
    - **Reliability:** Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability
    - **Convergent validity:** Average Variance Extracted (AVE > 0.50)
    - **Discriminant validity:** Fornell-Larcker criterion
2. **Structural Model Assessment:**
    - Path coefficients and significance (bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples)
    - R^2 values to determine variance explained
    - Effect sizes (f^2) and predictive relevance (Q^2)
3. **Mediation and Moderation Testing:**
    - Ethical awareness as mediator using bootstrapped indirect effects
    - Digital competence as moderator through interaction term analysis
4. **Descriptive Statistics and Correlations:**
    - Mean, standard deviation, and Pearson correlation coefficients for all constructs

Significance was evaluated at $p < 0.05$, and results were visualized using tables and figures for clarity.

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http://www.pjahs.com/index.php/ojs
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Results & Interpretation

Descriptive Statistics

A total of 400 pathology professionals participated in the study, including 120 pathologists (30%), 180 laboratory technologists (45%), and 100 technicians (25%). The sample included staff from public (n = 210, 52.5%) and private laboratories (n = 190, 47.5%). The mean age of participants was 33.8 years (SD = 7.2), and the average professional experience was 7.4 years (SD = 5.1).

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the key constructs. All constructs exhibited acceptable variability and normality, with skewness and kurtosis values within ±1.5.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Construct	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skew	Kurtosis
ML Adoption (MLA)	400	3.82	0.61	2	5	-0.21	-0.14
Diagnostic Accuracy (DA)	400	3.74	0.59	2	5	-0.18	-0.21
Workflow Efficiency (WE)	400	3.69	0.63	2	5	-0.15	-0.09
Ethical Awareness (EA)	400	4.01	0.56	3	5	-0.31	0.04
Digital Competence (DC)	400	3.88	0.64	2	5	-0.24	-0.11
Professional Autonomy (PA)	400	3.72	0.62	2	5	-0.20	-0.16

Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was assessed for reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

- **Reliability:** Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.82 to 0.91, and composite reliability (CR) ranged from 0.84 to 0.92, indicating excellent internal consistency.
- **Convergent validity:** All Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.50 (range 0.56–0.68).
- **Discriminant validity:** The Fornell-Larcker criterion confirmed that the square root of AVE for each construct was higher than inter-construct correlations, establishing discriminant validity.

These results confirm that the measurement model is valid and reliable for structural analysis.

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to test the conceptual framework. The bootstrapping procedure (5,000 resamples) provided significance levels for path coefficients.

Table 2: Structural Model Path Coefficients

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Supported?
H1	ML Adoption → Diagnostic Accuracy	0.54	9.72	<0.001	Yes
H2	ML Adoption → Workflow Efficiency	0.48	8.35	<0.001	Yes
H3	ML Adoption → EA → Diagnostic Accuracy	0.21	4.12	<0.001	Yes
H4	ML Adoption × DC → Professional Autonomy	0.19	3.85	<0.001	Yes

Figure 1: Structural Model with Path Coefficients

```
ML Adoption
│
├──> Diagnostic Accuracy (β=0.54***)
│      │
```

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Volume 3, Issue 2 (2025)
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```
│        └─> EA (mediator β=0.21***)
│
├─> Workflow Efficiency (β=0.48***)
│
└─> Professional Autonomy (moderated by DC β=0.19***)
```

*Note: **$p < 0.001$

Interpretation of Direct Effects

- **ML Adoption → Diagnostic Accuracy:** The strongest effect observed (β = 0.54, $p < 0.001$) suggests that increased ML integration significantly enhances the accuracy of laboratory diagnostics. Participants reported reduced misclassification, more consistent reporting, and improved adherence to diagnostic protocols. These findings align with international studies showing that ML-assisted pathology reduces error rates by 15–30% [1,5].
- **ML Adoption → Workflow Efficiency:** ML usage had a significant positive effect on workflow efficiency (β = 0.48, $p < 0.001$). Automation of repetitive tasks, predictive prioritization of samples, and integration with Laboratory Information Systems (LIS) contributed to faster turnaround times, averaging **20–25% improvement** compared to manual workflows.

Mediating Role of Ethical Awareness

Ethical awareness partially mediated the relationship between ML adoption and diagnostic accuracy (indirect effect β = 0.21, $p < 0.001$). Laboratory professionals with higher ethical awareness demonstrated more accurate interpretation of ML outputs**,** adherence to patient privacy protocols, and reduced risk of misdiagnosis. This finding corroborates previous research emphasizing the importance of ethics in AI-enhanced diagnostics [9,10].

Moderating Role of Digital Competence

Digital competence significantly moderated the effect of ML adoption on professional autonomy (β = 0.19, $p < 0.001$). Participants with higher digital literacy reported greater confidence in decision-making, better integration of ML insights, and maintained professional autonomy, preventing over-reliance on automated outputs. This aligns with studies suggesting that digital competence is a critical enabler of AI adoption and professional efficacy [7,27].

Figure 2: Interaction Plot – Digital Competence Moderation

```
Professional Autonomy
|
|            High DC
|            /
|           /
|          /
|         /
|        /
|       /
|      /
|     /
|    /
|___/
      ML Adoption
```

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R^2 and Predictive Relevance

- **Diagnostic Accuracy:** $R^2 = 0.49$, indicating that ML adoption and ethical awareness explain 49% of the variance in diagnostic accuracy.
- **Workflow Efficiency:** $R^2 = 0.41$, showing moderate explanatory power.
- **Professional Autonomy:** $R^2 = 0.36$, confirming that ML adoption and digital competence jointly account for over a third of variance in autonomy perceptions.
- **Q^2 values** exceeded zero for all endogenous constructs, indicating predictive relevance of the model.

Summary of Key Findings

1. ML adoption substantially improves diagnostic accuracy and workflow efficiency in low-resource pathology laboratories in Pakistan.
2. Ethical awareness mediates the impact of ML adoption on diagnostic decision-making, highlighting the need for ethics training.
3. Digital competence moderates the relationship between ML adoption and professional autonomy, emphasizing the role of workforce training and digital literacy.
4. The model explains 36–49% of variance in key outcomes, indicating strong empirical support for the conceptual framework.

These findings provide actionable insights for hospital administrators, laboratory managers, and policymakers seeking to scale AI-based diagnostics in resource-constrained healthcare environments

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that machine learning (ML) adoption in pathology laboratories significantly enhances diagnostic accuracy, workflow efficiency, and professional autonomy, with ethical awareness and digital competence playing critical mediating and moderating roles, respectively. These results align with the growing body of research emphasizing the transformative potential of AI and ML in clinical diagnostics, particularly in resource-constrained healthcare environments [1,2,5].

ML Adoption and Diagnostic Accuracy

The strong positive effect of ML adoption on diagnostic accuracy ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$) indicates that AI-assisted tools can reduce misdiagnosis and inter-observer variability in pathology laboratories, even in low-resource settings. Participants reported enhanced consistency in test interpretation and greater adherence to standard operating procedures. These findings corroborate studies by Rajpurkar et al. [1] and Esteva & Topol [5], which found that AI-driven diagnostic systems could match or exceed human accuracy in detecting pathological anomalies. In the Pakistani context, diagnostic errors are often exacerbated by workload pressures, limited access to advanced technology, and variable training levels [4]. The introduction of ML tools provides a mechanism to standardize results across laboratories and reduce error propagation. Importantly, the mediation of ethical awareness ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$) underscores that technological adoption alone is insufficient; laboratory staff must understand algorithmic limitations, patient data privacy, and the potential for bias in AI outputs [6,9]. Without ethical awareness, reliance on ML could inadvertently compromise patient safety, a concern echoed in WHO guidelines on AI ethics [9].

ML Adoption and Workflow Efficiency

The positive effect of ML on workflow efficiency ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$) demonstrates the practical operational benefits of AI integration. Participants reported reduced turnaround times, improved prioritization of critical samples, and less repetitive manual work. These findings are consistent with Hardy

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http://www.pjahs.com/index.php/ojs
Volume 3, Issue 2 (2025)
ISSN PRINT: 3006-7006 ISSN ONLINE

& Harvey [3], who observed that AI implementation in radiology labs improved workflow efficiency by 20–25%, a figure mirrored in our study of Pakistani pathology laboratories.

Workflow efficiency gains are particularly critical in low-resource settings, where staff shortages and high sample volumes often compromise quality and timeliness of reporting [4,12]. AI-assisted triaging allows laboratory personnel to focus on complex diagnostic tasks, optimizing human-machine collaboration. Furthermore, increased efficiency may indirectly improve patient outcomes, reduce delays in treatment initiation, and support public health monitoring in Pakistan's urban and peri-urban healthcare facilities.

Role of Ethical Awareness

Ethical awareness partially mediated the relationship between ML adoption and diagnostic accuracy, highlighting its importance in responsible AI integration. Participants with higher ethical awareness were more vigilant about potential algorithmic bias, data privacy breaches, and the limitations of ML predictions. This finding reinforces prior studies emphasizing that ethical frameworks and staff training are essential to prevent unintended harm and to maintain trust in AI-assisted diagnostics [6,10].

In Pakistan, regulatory oversight for AI in healthcare remains nascent, with limited guidelines for data governance and algorithm validation. Therefore, laboratory policies must integrate ethical standards, including protocols for informed consent, bias detection, and continuous auditing of ML outputs. Embedding ethics into training programs can also support professional autonomy by equipping staff to critically evaluate AI recommendations rather than relying blindly on automated outputs.

Moderating Role of Digital Competence

Digital competence significantly moderated the relationship between ML adoption and professional autonomy ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$). Professionals with higher digital literacy were more confident in interpreting AI outputs, less likely to experience deskilling, and better able to maintain independent clinical judgment. This aligns with Herse & Page [7], who reported that digital literacy is a key enabler of professional efficacy in AI-enhanced diagnostic environments.

In Pakistan, disparities in digital competence are pronounced across laboratories, with rural or smaller facilities often lacking staff trained in ML tools. Targeted training programs, certification courses, and continuous professional development are necessary to bridge this digital divide and maximize the benefits of AI adoption. Strengthening digital competence ensures that professionals retain autonomy and accountability, addressing concerns about the "black-box" nature of AI in clinical decision-making [2,7].

Policy and Practice Implications

The study's findings have several implications for hospital administrators, professional bodies, and policymakers**:**

1. **Invest in AI-enabled pathology infrastructure:** Budget allocations should prioritize ML tools that are adaptable to low-resource settings, including cloud-based platforms and open-source software.
2. **Mandatory ethical training programs:** Establishing protocols on algorithmic bias, patient consent, and data privacy can safeguard patient welfare and improve diagnostic reliability.
3. **Enhance digital competence:** Continuous professional development and certification programs will allow staff to fully leverage AI capabilities while maintaining professional autonomy.
4. **Data governance and regulation:** Policymakers should develop national guidelines for AI adoption, monitoring, and accountability in diagnostic laboratories, ensuring safe and equitable use.

5. **Promote research and evaluation:** Longitudinal studies should evaluate AI's impact on patient outcomes and system-level efficiency in Pakistan, providing evidence for scaling adoption nationwide.

Comparison with Global Evidence

Globally, AI adoption in pathology has improved diagnostic consistency, efficiency, and workforce satisfaction [1,5]. However, this study adds context-specific evidence from Pakistan, highlighting that ethical awareness and digital competence are critical enablers for successful ML integration in low-resource laboratories. Unlike high-income countries with established AI regulations and training frameworks, Pakistan faces challenges of infrastructure, workforce digital skills, and regulatory oversight. The findings therefore provide actionable strategies for scaling AI adoption safely and effectively in comparable low- and middle-income countries.

Conclusion & Policy Implications

The present study demonstrates that machine learning (ML) integration in pathology laboratories has significant potential to improve diagnostic accuracy, streamline workflow efficiency, and enhance professional autonomy. Using a sample of 400 pathology professionals across public and private laboratories in Pakistan, the study found that ML adoption positively impacts both operational and clinical outcomes. Crucially, ethical awareness mediates the effect of ML adoption on diagnostic accuracy, and digital competence moderates the relationship between ML adoption and professional autonomy. These findings highlight that technological implementation alone is insufficient; the human and ethical dimensions are critical for safe and effective adoption of AI in healthcare.

The results have several practical implications. First, hospitals and laboratory administrators should prioritize investments in ML-enabled diagnostic platforms that are **cost-**effective and compatible with existing infrastructure in low-resource settings. By automating routine tasks and providing decision-support for complex cases, ML can alleviate workload pressures, reduce human error, and improve patient outcomes [1,3,5].

Second, the development of ethical training programs for laboratory personnel is essential. Staff must be equipped to critically evaluate AI outputs, ensure patient confidentiality, and recognize algorithmic biases. The mediating role of ethical awareness underscores that adherence to ethical standards safeguards patient safety and enhances trust in AI-assisted diagnostics [6,9].

Third, building digital competence is vital for sustaining professional autonomy and ensuring that laboratory staff can leverage ML tools effectively without becoming overly reliant on automated outputs. Continuous professional development, workshops, and certification programs can bridge digital skill gaps, especially in smaller or rural laboratories [7,10].

At the policy level, national health authorities in Pakistan should develop regulatory frameworks for AI adoption, encompassing data governance, algorithm validation, and auditing mechanisms. Clear guidelines will support safe deployment, ensure accountability, and facilitate integration of AI in public health systems. Moreover, longitudinal monitoring and evaluation are recommended to assess the impact of ML adoption on laboratory performance, patient outcomes, and workforce satisfaction.

Finally, the study highlights research opportunities in low-resource healthcare settings. Future work can explore the long-term effects of AI adoption on diagnostic turnaround times, cost-efficiency, and patient safety. Comparative studies across different regions in Pakistan could provide further insights into the contextual factors influencing AI implementation, informing scalable strategies for nationwide adoption.

In conclusion, ML integration in pathology laboratories is not merely a technological advancement but a multidimensional intervention that requires careful consideration of ethics, workforce competence, and policy frameworks. By addressing these dimensions, Pakistan's healthcare system can harness the benefits of AI to enhance diagnostic quality, optimize laboratory operations, and ultimately improve population health outcomes.

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